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MAJOR SUNSHINE THE MAN OF THREE LIVES



OR,

The Waiting Waifs at Git Thar.

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BEND," "SNAPSHOT SAM," "PISTOL
PARDS," "HANDS UP," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

ON THE WAY TO GIT THAR.

GIT THAR was a brisk and tough little mining-camp, a fair day's journey from Cactus Fork. Time enough to describe it when the scene is transferred to it; but the trail between the rival towns was under a cloud; it was shadowed by Sunshine.

Not the sunshine of every-day life, however, but the Major Sunshine, who collected certain irregular percentages from the unhappy travelers who journeyed between the two points.

A mild-mannered man the major was, to those who elevated their digits upon the first request, but a very fiend to fight when the opportunity was forced upon him.

A few months of arduous labor in this field of usefulness had given him such a reputation that passengers from the Gulch began to look upon

"R-R-R-A-GH! CL'AR THER WAY FUR THER TIN TIGER ON TEN WHEELS. WARP IT TO 'EM, PARD—ELI'S COMIN'!"

his appearance as a matter of course, and to provide for it accordingly. The Express Company did a lively business, and their treasure-coach started off with a guard that was as regularly organized and thoroughly armed as a company of soldiers. The arrangement cost money, but it paid.

So far the Express messengers had never been attacked, and Sunshine had been satisfied with what he found on the passengers by the regular coaches, provided it was produced with sufficient promptness. How long he would be content with the diminished receipts remained to be seen, since these precautionary measures had only been established for a few weeks.

All his work was got in south of the Fork, though there were not wanting prophetic souls who avowed that if things went on this way he would extend his operations further north, and terrorize the trail for a hundred miles or more. Until he did, the people coming and going were willing to take their chances, once over the twenty miles of road that he called his own.

Of course there had been some resistance; and once a heavy cargo of passengers had gathered some assistance and set out on the trail of the bandits. Not one of the party ever came back, so that it was not likely the experiment would be tried again, unless some peculiar atrocity aroused the region, and brought out a force that fifteen or twenty men, the supposed strength of Sunshine's band, could not resist.

The through coach for Git Thar rolled into Cactus Fork one bright, sunshiny afternoon, away ahead of time. Lame Charley, the Jehu of the outfit, had made a little mistake in his calculations, and had his cargo on hand half an hour at least before supper was ready for them, much to the disgust of Goodman—the proprietor of the Traveler's Rest, the house at which the stages stopped.

About the first man to get out was a laughing-faced little fellow, with blue eyes, light hair, and hands so white that it was evident he and hard work had a very slender acquaintance.

His hands dropped naturally into the side pockets of his sack coat as he gave a quick glance around; then he strolled carelessly into the office, leaving the rest of the passengers to follow or not, according to their own pleasure.

"Set 'em up, Johnny, and hurry up that grub of yours. I feel sharp set enough to eat a half elephant on toast."

"Have supper ready in the jerk of a lamb's tail. B'en ready now ef I'd knowed yer war comin'; but Lame Charley kinder crowded the funer'l this P.M. Wa'n't lookin' fur him fur an hour yit. But fur ther pure juice ov ther corn, you've come jest to ther right shop. Don't have ter wait hyar. Thar's ther article."

He set down the decanter with a plump, and the stranger waved his hand toward it as he turned toward several of his fellow-passengers.

"Join me, gentlemen. It's not good for man to drink alone."

"Jest what I war sayin', but when a man beats me to the bar I ain't never objectin' to him a-makin' it his shout. Ov course, we'll j'ine."

"Thanks fer the condescension. Methinks I heard your gentle voice on the upper deck; if so, we're sort of half-way pards, that ought to be able to give and take. When folks want to introduce me, they mention 'On Deck Harry.'"

To the question in his voice the other responded, laughing boisterously:

"An' I'm Travellin' Eli, on ther way ter Git Thar. Whar I go thar's gin'rally fun by the cord, an' ther boys pay me ter kim back ag'in. Let's drink fu'st, an' chin arterwards. Mebbe you know suthin' about that lively leetle burg, an' I'm jest a-dyin' ter git p'int on it. Hyar's us!"

He poured out a generous libation as he spoke, and the rest followed his example, each surrounding his "poison" with the neatness and dispatch that comes of long practice.

"I take it that you are going down to Git Thar on business?" remarked On Deck Harry, with an inquisitiveness that one would hardly have expected from his general appearance.

"You bet I'm goin' thar on bizzness; an', ef ye'r thar, you'll see it. I'm goin' ter show 'em more bizzness, an' wider fun to ther squar' inch, than you ever heered ov."

"That's the place to try it on. From all accounts, they are pretty lively over there, and you won't have to ask long before they come your way."

"An' Eli 'll be thar ter meet 'em. R-a-a-gh! I'm ther tin tiger on ten wheels! Stir me up, somebody, ef yer want ter hear me growl. When me teeth meet, ther piece comes out!" and Eli growled once more till the sound rolled from one end of the house to the other.

"Um, yes, I see. Any particular reason for raising a racket here, and at this early hour in the day?" asked Harry, dryly. "I have no doubt that you could be accommodated in Cactus Fork. Even Johnny, here, could make it interesting if he hasn't forgotten his old-time cunning. Did you ever see him at work?"

Eli looked around at the question. He looked in the pride of his heart as though the landlord was an object scarce worthy of attention. He stared with an earnestness begotten of a revela-

tion. He—well—he wilted. Goodman was leaning forward with his arms resting on the bar, observing him attentively; and in each hand was grasped a navy six, with the hammer back.

"Ah! you observe," smiled Harry. "Mr. Goodman's boarders are accustomed to enjoy their *siesta* undisturbed. They are probably all awake by this time; but there is a chance, a bare possibility, you know—and that howl would awake the dead. For the sake of our nerves, pray, don't do it again. The old man don't say *much*, but he thinks a good deal. And when he thinks he is apt to shoot."

"I'll swar! Ef sech a gentle yip ez that could brung him up so fur, what would a r'ale, rip-tearin', out an' out, 'way-up-ther-crick roar 'a' did? I've a teeny, teenty mind ter try it on an' see. I ain't wonderin' half ther Fork bez gone on 'long down to er place whar thar's more git up an' git."

"I don't think you better. For all he is going to make out of this crowd it would hardly pay to have the floor mussed up. Better think it over and keep quiet till we get out into the woods. Then you can growl away your level best—always providing Lame Charley can stand the nonsense."

"Don't crowd me," answered Eli, speaking in a very much humbler voice. "I ain't no bizzness hyar, nobow, 'cept on'y blowin' off a leetle surplus steam. I kin howl wuss ner a man an' a fog-horn; er I kin peep small as ther chick jest frum ther shell. You folks don't want ter hear me. Good-ernuff! I cave. D'yer want me ter hold up me hands?"

"I want you ter keep yer dog-gone mouth shut. I dunno ef it's all blow, an' I dunno but it's all blow; but ther man ez tries ter raise a row, when we's jest settin' down ter tea, 'll be mighty apt ter git cold water er suthin' like it, poured down ther back. Thar's ther bell, now. Them ez are fur grub, this are ther 'p'inted time. An' them ez are in fur foolishness—let 'em follow, er raise the'r finger! When I see that I'll crook mine, an hurrah fur kingdom come!"

"To-be-sure. That same bell's what I've been a-waitin' fur. Exqueeze me—an' no harm done."

And then Eli moved off in search of his supper as quietly as though he always lived there, while the rest followed with a meekness that showed that the sample of Goodman's methods of argument had not been lost on them.

Last of all came On Deck Harry and Goodman.

"Ever see him before?" asked Harry, in a sotto voice.

Johnny shook his head.

"Mebbe I'm a leetle hard on him, but he looks like one of those dum-fool bad men, ez makes heaps ov trouble, jest in the goodness ov their hearts. Ef yer lets 'em go on they allers kills somebody, an' ther best plan are ter blow 'em cold ez soon ez they begins. 'Peared to me ez though he might have something in fer you; an' I don't allow no man ter be crowded in my house."

"Thanks. It's a good principle, though it's a loss of good intention in my case. I might have talked to Eli myself if I had not seen that you had the drop on him. So he is a stranger in this region. I thought he might be one of your local celebrities. Probably I will see something more of him at Git Thar. He may set up for a chief in that interesting city, in which case I can have the pleasure of assisting at his funeral—be one of the mourners, in fact, as an old friend."

"Don't fool yerself. He's a heap wuss man than he looks. I kin tell it in his eyes. Johnny Goodman ain't often fooled, an' he says Eli ain't a slouch on ther war-path when he gits agoin'. I hed him foul, that's all. Now, ef ye'r goin' ter grub it's time you war pitchin' in. I like 'em all ter hev a fair send-off."

There seemed to be little more to be said about Eli, so that Harry accepted the advice without hesitation, and took his place at the long table, where some half dozen of the passengers were already doing justice to the good things of Johnny Goodman's larder. The biscuit were well baked, the bacon done to a turn, and they all fell to with a relish. It was only when Harry had almost completed his meal that he noticed the solitary individual at the extreme upper end of the table.

This individual was a young lady, with a fresh face, a fully developed form, black eyes and hair, and a self-possessed air. As he gazed in her direction she looked lazily at him, letting her eyes rest upon him for some seconds.

"A mighty good-looking piece of calico," he thought, "but I don't understand what she is doing here. I wouldn't stop much to move my plate up in that direction, and see if it would be at all worth while to extend the acquaintance."

While he was thinking the landlord tapped him on the arm.

"Ef ye'r about done with ther grub mebbe yer wouldn't object ter meeting Guv'nor Bang's darter. She's goin' ter travel your way and 's jest dyin' fur company."

"And who in the name of the seven saints is Governor Bang? I'll take people on trust if I can see their face, but hanged if I don't like to

know something about their relatives if they once begin to pin their character to them."

"Suthin' in that same, but I guess you're off this time. Bang, he war a good man, but they scooped his rocks and then he went over the range. In confidence, mind yer, ther leetle lady are goin' down to Git Thar to see if she can't git some p'int on how it war done. If you want to hear ther rest ov ther story you kin ask her to tell it. Anyway, she has a notion that she don't want to take the journey in a mixed crowd, an' has been waitin' fur a couple o' days fur good company—an' puttin' in ther time hyar lookin' 'round. She don't think ther hours has bin wasted, an' when I gently whispered that you was goin' along over she said mebbe it was time fur her ter start."

"Anything to oblige a lady. You can tell her that Harry Harper is very much at her service."

After that it was only a moment until the young man was being presented.

Miss Bang, if anything, improved on acquaintance, and in a straightforward way corroborated the statements of Johnny Goodman. Whether or no he was moved by the flattery, Harry Harper was most cordial in his manner, and most positive in his assurances that she would find the journey devoid of danger. In about five minutes they were chatting freely; in ten the young lady was preparing for her departure and in twenty-five the vehicle was once more on the way.

"Mr. Goodman confided something of your story to me," said Harry, gallantly, "and I felt an interest at once. Perhaps I might be of some service hereafter. If so, command me."

"Thank you for your kind offer; but no one can help me. I must work for myself."

Evidently the little lady did not care to make any confidences; and Harper was not the man to beg for them. He turned the conversation in another channel. He could be grave or gay, wise or witty, as occasion seemed to require. There never was a pleasanter and yet more unassuming traveler. As the shades of evening dropped around them he was singing in a rich tenor voice "Isle of Beauty," and the coach was drifting rapidly through the shadows of trees and boulders that began to overhang the trail.

This could not keep up forever, though. As the hours wore away, On Deck Harry leaning back in the corner of the seat closed his eyes, and if he was not asleep and dreaming he was certainly not very far off from the land of Nod when the coach halted suddenly, and a harsh voice exclaimed:

"No nonsense there! The first sign of it and there'll be dead meat along the trail!"

CHAPTER II.

A CANDIDATE FOR THE ROPE.

WIDE awake was On Deck Harry in an instant, and before the last word of the threat had been spoken a couple of little clicks were heard from his corner, that showed that he was ready. Then, outside, there was the noise of a scramble and a fall, followed by a muffled curse, that was suddenly broken off. Some one of the outsiders had made an effort at escape; and met with something that sounded like failure.

"If you please," said Miss Bang, leaning forward and touching Harper's arm, "I know you are willing to fight, but, if you do, what is to become of me? If this is Major Sunshine, from all I have heard of him he always allows a coach to go through from which he has met with no resistance. I have nothing with me to lose, and, unless you are a great deal more unfortunate than most lucky men you have not enough wealth on your person to pay for fighting. Will you not protect me in the only way in which it can be done? There are some terrible stories of what they have done to those who resist."

"Oh, have it your own way. I'd just as soon sleep as fight, and if you say hands up, up they go. But, if you want to see a pleasant, comfortable time, give the word and you'll find me on deck, every time."

"Then, please let it be, at least until we know what are their intentions."

"And if there's a chance left, then, I want to know. But, all right; just as you have it. Eli seems to have broken his neck; and the rest are behaving like little lambs. There they are!"

Sure enough, footsteps approached the coach, and the same voice continued:

"We don't want to be unnecessarily harsh; but you don't want to do any extra fooling around the band-wagon. In just five seconds by the watch we can fill that coach all full of holes, and the cargo will suffer with it. When I crook my finger a dozen guns will be shouting. Now one at a time, just step this way."

The address was suddenly cut short. From a point but a few yards in the rear of the coach a pistol was fired.

"Good enough!" said On Deck Harry, turning toward his companion. "There's Eli getting in his work—or trying to. Pity that we're not out, taking a hand in. What do you say?"

"That all such resistance is worse than useless."

"But I'll see what it amounts to, all the same."

While he spoke there was a second pistol-shot from nearly the same spot, and as he leaped lightly from the coach Harry saw a man dart wildly away and spring into the bushes, followed closely by three or four other men who might well belong to the outlaws.

"Might have known it," he muttered. The moment he touched the ground he found that he was facing three men on horseback, whose uplifted hands undoubtedly grasped weapons.

"Don't get excited, my friends," he continued. "I'm number one, coming out to see what is the matter, and my hands are held very high. There's no one else inside but a lady, that you can swear won't fight. You can tot up the outside fer yourself; but it's not very heavy. Most of the crowd stopped off at the Fork, more luck for them, and worse for me. You've got the only real bad man in the cargo on the run, so handle us lightly. We're not going to squeal if you treat us fair."

"What's that you say about a woman inside?" asked the leader of the outlaws, noting that every man was covered.

It was not a bad place, by the way, for the ambushade, shadows by the roadside, and the moonlight streaming in through a rift, illuminating the center of the trail. A dozen more men might be standing a few yards away without being visible to Harry Harper, who, on the other hand, was as fair a mark as any one could wish. He heard the question, and answered it without hesitation.

"A lady who got on at the Fork, and who, having very little with her to lose, decidedly objects to anything like a racket. Of course the sex must be served, which was why I didn't chip in to help that blasted idiot who fired and fell back."

"Clear as mud. Just step forward and I will interview the lady. For the present we are genial and genteel. I hope no one will be so foolish as to force an alteration of the arrangement. The boys, of course, will relieve you of any surplus cash you may have, but that is pure business."

"Thanks. I understand. I've been in this line myself, and didn't generally do such things at a venture. There's a little loose change in my left hand pantaloons pocket, but the bulk of my coin is in the grip under the front seat. As a matter of policy I would suggest that you scoop the contents, leaving me enough for a starter. I don't want any hard feelings. As for the balance I don't think there's enough wealth in the outfit to start a respectable sweat-cloth, unless Eli has more salted down than his looks call for."

"And who in thunder is Eli?" retorted the leader of the road-agents, evidently a little puzzled by the coolness of their victim.

"Eli? Oh, he's the man in the brush—unless he's crawled back and got up there again. Confound him! If he didn't want to stay what did he begin for? He stood to get us in no end of a mix. Any other information desired? If not, I'll consign myself to the tender mercies of your lambs, and waltz away to the sacrifice."

"You better go. All that chin-music is not for nothing, and I suppose by this time you thing you have it all arranged. You'll find out how far you've slipped up when the trouble begins."

The hint was sufficient, and On Deck Harry stepped jauntily forward, his hands still over his head.

A few paces, and two men bounded up alongside of him.

"Clean me out quick, boys, and set me down somewhere, so I can take a rest. This thing is becoming monotonous."

Two hands at his wrists held him apparently helpless, while two other hands ran through his pockets and over his belongings in a rapid, scientific way.

"Blamed ef ther bloke didn't tell ther truth. Every one ov his duckets are in the left-hand hoxter ov his kicksies. I've heered ov angels ez wouldn't lie, but dash my ribs ef I ever b'lieved in 'em afore."

"Common sense would teach you to look for it there, my friend, so why should I not tell the truth?"

"Ez why?"

"Suppose, just as I was searching for change, I should have occasion to shoot. Keep your pistol-hand free from all entangling alliances, and you'll have twice the chance to get the drop on your man when he comes looking fer you."

"Well, you ain't got any irons about yer, no-how."

"To be sure not. Left them in the coach. Now, if you're done with me, dry up! I want to see what the captain has to say to Miss Bang."

And the prisoner, who had been thoroughly searched, threw himself lazily down, without waiting for the desired permission.

"All right! Got thar; but don't yer disremember that ther's a six right at ther back ov yer head, an' ther fu'st squirm thet looks like foul away goes yer brains."

"Don't worry. I notice the attention, and it is fully appreciated."

A muttered growl was the only answer; but

On Deck Harry was fooled if he expected to overhear what was passing at the coach. Something was being said, but as it was said in a low tone nothing but a confused murmur of voices reached his ears.

"Confound him for his over politeness," he thought. "It might be worth while to catch on, and if it was one of these toughs the sound would carry a mile. Decidedly, this Captain Sunshine is a dangerous fellow."

The outlaw had approached the coach with his hat in his hand. He had no trouble in seeing that the face at the window was a fair one.

"Certainly you will pardon us, miss. Business is business, and it must be attended to; but of course you have nothing personally to fear. In fact, I am so anxious for your safety that I would strongly advise you to put such valuables and money as you may be able to spare into my keeping, where, I assure you, they will be entirely safe."

"What I was going to propose," retorted the young lady, every bit as cool, and holding out her hand as she spoke.

"I have heard such favorable reports of Major Sunshine that I have no hesitation whatever in doing as you say."

"That is cheering—though I see that you are laboring under a slight mistake. Major Sunshine was unable to be with us to-night, but, as his unworthy substitute—Lieutenant Starlight, miss, at your service. I hope there will be no occasion for complaint. Thanks. Now, if you will allow me I will see what there is in the grip-sack your friend spoke of. Ah! Do not trouble yourself. This is it. I see my men have attended to the passengers on the upper deck, and secured the mail-pouch. Take care of your precious health; avoid, as much as possible, journeys in the night air, and believe me your obedient servant! You, there, Lame Charley, agitate your flagellator and compel the quadrupeds to proceed. If you stop this side of the nine-mile cut-off for man or angel, you will have a tunnel through your cranium. You hear me?"

"I should remark," Lame Charley solemnly responded, and he brought the braid down over his "cattle" with an earnestness that showed that he took the advice in good faith.

"But—stop! stop!" shouted Miss Bang, "you're not going to leave Mr. Harper, your passenger?"

"Sorry fur him; but I reckon somebody's got to be left, an' it sha'n't be me. You heard what he said?"

With Miss Bang leaning out of the window, with the remaining outside passengers crouching low, and Charley applying the silk with energetic industry, the coach rolled away, and was lost to sight.

"An' now then, boss, ef ther pic-nic are 'bout over, mebbe we kin git down ter biz. What's ter be done with this feller? Shall I plug him?"

"Don't be brash, or unduly anxious, Grizzly. Firstly, how does that grip-sack pan out? Perhaps there's a recommendation to mercy in it."

"There's just eleven hundred and thirty in it," put in Harper. "I had the thirty, you understand, and the eleven hundred are the proceeds of three days' sitting at short cards. I thought with that amount I ought to be able to move on the enemy's works at Git Thar. You are welcome to the eleven hundred; but I would suggest that you leave me the thirty for a starter, and if you threw in the odd hundred I would be everlastingly obliged."

"He's right to a dollar, boss," said Grizzly, looking up, "leastwise ef I ain't spelled some ov these big bills backward. But I duno ez we need him ter help us do that, an' thar ain't much time ter waste foolin' 'round hyar. That gerloot ez got away may come back jest a-sailin'. Better shoot him off hand, er string him up."

"Don't hurry the funeral. If it was my say, so I'd put him up fast enough; but the major might whisper a word or two about it, and whisper it hard. You hang on to the grip-sack, and the rest of the plunder, and two of the boys can lead him in. There may be something behind it all, that we don't know. And, anyhow, it's not our circus. Off you go now."

"Perhaps you didn't hear what I said," interjected On Deck Harry. "Do you want me to say it again; or are you anxious to have trouble?"

"Excuse me," responded the lieutenant, ironically. "But it is really too dark to undertake the task of dividing the plunder. Just mention the matter to the major and I have no doubt he will be happy to arrange it. Now, off with you."

"Better move, boss—er do yer want us ter kerry a corpus? Stiffs are mighty mean things ter handle, but we kin do it—on a pinch. Talk quick."

"I'm moving—whenever you show me the way and say it's all right; but, hang me if I'm going to stumble along in the dark."

"You'll hang fast 'nuff," retorted Grizzly, with a grin that somehow could be felt if not seen in the dark. "But, we'll see yer don't stumble while yer on ther road. You, Pete, git up an' we'll put him behind yer. Reckon it

wouldn't be safe ter trust him alone, bein' ez he don't know the way."

And without any more chaffing, in which Harper could not really see any present purpose, the arrangement was completed. He was set up behind one of the outlaws, around whom his arms were fastened, a bandage was fixed over his eyes, and he set out on a journey that seemed to last for hours.

When at length a halt was made it was after having passed several sentries, and entered a cavern of some size.

"Now, you jest keep yer mouth shut," grunted Pete in his ear. "Thar's no chin-chin 'lowed hyar. Them ez tries it on goes right over ther range. Hyar you be, an' ther major 'll be with yer in a minnit."

The bandage was removed from his eyes, and the captive found himself standing in a small apartment, that was furnished very much after the style of the office of a man of business.

While he carelessly glanced around some one came in hastily at his back, and stood watching him. As Harper did not turn his head he could not see what this person looked like, but after a little he heard him say:

"You're the man without a doubt. Now, what have you got to say for yourself?"

"Bless your soul, it's not I that is anxious to talk," he retorted, at last turning leisurely around. "I had nothing to do with coming here, and I'm only anxious to get away. If you wait for me to say something you'll die standing. I'm not that kind."

"Exactly; but you needn't talk unless you want to. As I intend to hang you, anyhow, it can make no difference. I only wanted to be sure that I had the right person. It may save some other poor devil from going up the flume by mistake."

"Well, of all blame fools—who do you think I am?"

"John Price, detective, and an elected candidate for a wooden overcoat."

CHAPTER III.

HARRY HARPER COMES ON DECK.

"THAT'S one better than I counted on. If you furnish clothing for your corpses you're not as black as you're painted. That rot about John Price, and a detective, is just as good as anything else to paint on it; but I didn't believe—I really *didn't* believe that you'd play it so low down as to lie to a dying man."

"You take it coolly," answered the road-agent, examining the features of his prisoner more keenly, by the light of the flaming torches.

"That's my business. If I didn't I'd mighty soon be left. You can win sometimes with a six for high. If you don't, what's the use to grizzle? Maybe, next time, you'll hold all aces. I've traveled on cards since I could hold a pack, and the boys don't call me On Deck Harry for nothing. I'm always ready to call whatever is in the box. Wolf shouldn't eat wolf, and you haven't shown your usual good sense fooling around me."

"Why, confound you, what are you coughing about? Haven't I got you foul? If I wasn't the best-natured man in the world I'd have had you cold before this. You've got your business and I have mine. If you get me it's all right; and if, to protect myself, I kill you, what could be squarer? And it's a sure thing that I'll do it. I thought, maybe, you'd be willing to tell just who's behind you in this thing, but since I've seen you I guess there's not much use to ask questions. If you have any statements to make I'll listen to them. Otherwise, you can go away to execution."

"Thanks. Do I look like the squealing kind? I should say not. I might suggest that before you go to extremes you make some inquiries about Harry Harper; but if you won't, all right again. When the box is empty there's no more cards to pull, and that's just all of it. Lead on, terrible satrap! Your servant's throat is at your disposal."

The two men were fairly matched in wits, and if it came to a physical struggle it was not so certain that there was much to choose between them.

Sunshine was the larger man, and very well built he was; but there is an old saying that "youth must be served," and Harper was the younger man, and was built from the ground up.

Though they measured each other, it was not with much idea of putting their judgments to the test of practical results. Sunshine had all the advantages in his favor, while Harper had an unpleasant consciousness of being covered by revolvers in invisible hands.

And yet the outlaw, in spite of what must have been a well-considered determination, hesitated a little.

"See here. I rather like what I've seen of you, and I believe you mean what you say. If I thought it would do any good I'd give you a chance. If I could be convinced that you would throw up the job and take a hand in with us, I'd almost be willing to trust you. Come; it's only a matter of five thousand if you succeed, and that won't go far when it's divided around. Who put you on this trail? Give that away and leave this region, and hanged if I won't pay

you the five thousand myself, as soon as I get even with the other fellow."

"What sort of truck are you giving me now? If I had you where there was half a chance to get the job finished, I'd punch your head. I've told you the straight story, and if you don't believe it you might as well tell me I lie and be done with it. If I get out of this, I'm not so sure I won't take the contract just to get even. Confound you! Do I look like a man-hunter?"

"That's enough. They told me I couldn't break your nerve or get you to own up. Maybe I can if I have time for the job. I'll let you dream over it a while, anyhow. You've heard what Major Sunshine can do; I'll give you a chance to feel before you get through with me. If you've got a secret, I'll roast it out of you. Here, Grizzly, lead him away."

A hand grasped the arm of the sport with no gentle pressure, while the rasping voice, that was beginning to sound unpleasantly familiar, grated on his ear.

"Ef I could on'y git ther word I'd do more ner lead yer away. Blame yer cross-eyed soul, what a heap ov trouble it 'u'd saved ef they'd hung yer when I wanted ter. Hyar! Step out lively!"

He gave a jerk; and then something else, between a grunt and a groan. If the roof of the cave had fallen in on him he could not have been more surprised. On Deck Harry just seemed to shake himself and Grizzly dropped all in a heap, the prisoner, without any trace of excitement, standing as composed as ever, looking at Major Sunshine, while he remarked:

"I've frequently mused on the mysterious ways of Providence. The man that tries to drag me when I ought to be led is invariably struck by lightning. The first flash generally teaches him sense. If it don't, the second takes him all apart."

"Hold hard there, Grizzly!" was the indirect answer, as the man sprung to his feet.

"It serves you right for putting on frills with a better man than you know how to be. I told you to lead him away. When I want you to do anything else I'll tell you. Drop that nonsense or I'll drop you. Turn him over to Sergeant Finnegan, and report yourself under arrest. I expect to run this camp or kill the kickers. Go, before I pull."

The interposition was just in time to recall the rising outlaw to his senses. His hand was on his revolver, and he was without a doubt ready to shoot.

"Ez you hev it, boss; an' I hope you'll excuse me. It's a heap ov trouble 'bout one sich a ger-loot, but it's not my say-so. This way, mister man. I'll show yer whar yer belong, with pleasure."

"And don't forget that two men I can trust will have you covered all the way."

So, the unsatisfactory interview being over, Harper went out of the presence of the chief no wiser than he entered it.

He did not have far to go. A short, narrow passage through the rock, and he found himself in a large, cavern-like room, though the one side had a great opening through which he could see the stars.

"Hyar you be, Finnegan. Keep him safe till ther boss calls for him, an' look out fur yer neck. He kicks mighty hard when he gets the chance."

"Sure, an' Oi'll be all there, an' av he gits away wid me he's welcome. Phat did ther major say he would do with him?"

"Hang him in the mornin'; an' you see that yer bez him thar when ther time comes."

"He'll be there, me b'ye; but why don't they off wid him to-night?"

"Expect ter hev his pard in, ter turn off 'long-side ov him; an' ther major thinks ez we kin wait that long ter see ther fun. Hyar's my tools. I'm under arrest."

"What does yer m'ane, me b'ye?"

"Fool ernuff ter let him knock me down. If he'd 'a' stamped on me yit I s'pose they'd 'a' gi'n him a leather medal and turned him loose. Yer ain't no use fur me, so I'll turn in. Roust me out ef I'm sleepin' when ther fun bergins."

Having executed his commission, Grizzly yielded up his revolvers and swaggered away.

The Irishman looked after him a moment, and then turned to his prisoner.

"Loie down there wid yez, an' don't let me have a word out av yer mouth, er it's thrubble we'll both be in."

He pointed to a corner as he spoke.

There was some sort of a couch there, and shrugging his shoulders, Harper turned to it, throwing himself lazily down, without a word.

"Sure, an' there's nothin' loike beiu' firrum wid 'em. He takes it loike a little lamb; an' av Oi'd begun wid the blarney Oi'd have had to ind wid the shtick."

"Ain't you a little off, old man?" asked Harry, rising partly, and leaning on his elbow. "I don't want to argue with you, but if you think that any little, red-headed Irishman of your weight and inches can handle me with a stick, or without it, you're as big a fool as you look, and that's saying a heap."

Finnegan stared aghast at the prisoner who dared to address him in such a manner. He was

neither small nor red-headed, and in his own mind he had not a doubt but that he could handle two such men as the prisoner. For a moment he even thought of proving it.

Then discipline prevailed.

"Say that to-morry noight, av yez pl'aze, an' Oi'll be glad to show yez. To-noight I won't have a worruid wid yez."

"Very well, then. Wake me up when the boss wants me. I haven't had a square night's sleep for a week."

Finnegan answered never a word, and in a very few moments the prisoner seemed to be asleep.

Of course, On Deck Harry had no notion of neglecting anything like an opportunity to escape; but none such had as yet shown itself.

Even if he could succeed in getting out of the immediate clutches of the outlaws, he appreciated the difficulty of finding his way through the labyrinth of halls in which he was involved. And he had said no more than the truth. He needed some rest to tone him up for an effort.

In five minutes more he really was sleeping. It must have been four or five hours later that he awoke, silently and suddenly. He could hear the murmur of voices, though at first he could distinguish no words.

Finnegan was snoring grandly, in one corner, while two of the outlaws walked backward and forward in front of the openings, from time to time glancing toward the prisoner.

"Is this a trap?" thought Harper. "If I only had my irons I'd engage to make a clean-up in no time, and it looks as though there wouldn't be much trouble to do it, anyway; only there may be something back. Better see how it is before I sail in."

On Deck Harry was inclined to caution, though to most persons in the same predicament it might seem as though there was but little to be done, anyway.

"I might get a chance to land one on that nearest chap the next time he comes my way; I might scratch his sixes before his pard could pull, and I might sweep the deck; but just as like as not that is what they are waiting for. You can't play such a game when they're looking out for it. And yet, if I don't try it on, it looks as though there would be a sultry time along about morning. The major is too confounded cool not to have it in for me pretty deep, and there's no chance that he'll listen to reason."

Still keeping up the pretense of sleep, he lay and watched.

It seemed a little strange that so much trouble should be taken to prevent his escaping, when he might have been tied up and thrown into a corner without much risk. Major Sunshine certainly had something in view; and his procedure looked rather toward a partnership than a rope, yet Harper had his doubts.

The sentinels kept up their march; and neither came any nearer. Harper saw that they were guarding on the one side the passage by which he had entered, and on another an opening that led into the outer world.

For half an hour he watched and waited, doubting if things were to be any worse; and somehow hoping for some chance by which they might be bettered.

Then the chance came, just when he had about given up looking for it.

The outlaw who guarded the passage leading toward the interior halted, and leaned forward, like one listening intently, while the other sentinel had just turned, and was walking away. As no sound was made, he saw nothing of the action.

It was now or never. As noiseless as a shadow On Deck Harry sprung from his couch, dropping lightly upon the floor of the cave. Two strides and his arm went back, and then forward.

After that there was nothing for the guard to do but to tumble. It was a swinging bit, that landed on his neck, though, fortunately for him, a little to one side of the spine.

As he fell Harper flung himself after him, and had his revolvers almost before he had landed. Just as the other sentinel turned with a cry of alarm he had the hammers back and was rising to shoot. If he wanted to have a chance he had to clear the way before Finnegan came to the rescue.

But as his hand was raising it was pushed out of line, and he himself half overthrown, by some one dashing past, who stumbled at the semi-collision, yet went on straight for the opening that led to the outer world.

The guard, taken by surprise, fired first and thought afterward. It was point-blank range, so that he had no excuse to miss; and it did not seem as though he had missed. The escaping man threw up his hands and pitched heavily forward, with a single deep groan.

CHAPTER IV.

THE PERSEVERANCE OF THE WICKED.

AT the report of the pistol Finnegan was awake and on his feet in an instant, darting forward at the man who had just gone down.

"Go slow, pard, I've got him! I didn't want

ter take him in but I had ter do it. Ther scaly little gerloot was comin' with ther bulge on."

Guard number two ceased speaking as a pistol cracked. He dropped the still smoking revolver, turned half-way around and staggered back, just as On Deck Harry, with clubbed revolver, landed a crushing blow upon Finnegan's skull, and then made a break for freedom.

Along with him went the man he had seen go down and who, up to the moment the second shot had been fired, he had thought was mortally wounded, if not dead.

"This way!" the man said sharply. "If you don't know this country stick to me and I'll pilot you through. They caught me off guard for once, but finders are not always keepers, and they'll howl a good while before they hang on to me again."

"All right, if you're a doctor, and I judge by your style that you are, I only know enough to hit where I see a head, and that won't go very far here."

"What I don't know won't amount to much. Keep close behind me. There's room for an ugly fall, and the gang will be out after us in half a minute, like a swarm of mad bees. Put in the time now, and we'll talk after while."

"I'm there, stranger. Do your best."

The stranger's promise was no empty boast. He darted down a rather steep declivity, turned sharply to the right, scrambled up the face of the rock where no path was to be seen, and then followed a blind sort of a trail that soon led into a natural roadway.

"Good enough!" he exclaimed, in a careless sort of whisper, "you take hold as though you knew all about it. The fools! There's a couple of them down there, watching the stable door, and not one of them has ever taken the trouble to find out the back way. Curse them all, I say! I'll be even with them yet. I got away with a couple to-night, and the gang will follow. And how did you happen to be there so handily? If you hadn't helped me out I'm afraid I'd have stood a good chance of going up the flume."

"On the road to Git Thar and the stage held up. There was some calico on board and I didn't want any nasty work while she was about. I just put up my hands when they shouted; and couldn't get them down again till about the time you hove in sight. I can't make out what sort of a round-up Sunshine is on to-night; and I never suspected from what I had heard of him, that he could be a natural born idiot."

"Don't fool yourself on that; he knows what he's up to. It's lucky you got away or you'd have heard sounds from home in the morning. Get a long breath here while we see if the coast is clear. Which way do you want to go?"

"I started for Git Thar, and I'm just obstinate fool enough to want to go through. If that's the direction you are going I guess we can travel together."

"It is not the direction I am traveling; but it won't take me far out of my way to start you on your journey. I feel like trusting you, you see, though I picked you up in mighty bad company."

"Pretty much what Sunshine said," retorted Harry. "I'm not asking favors of any man. I've got two sixes, and a head on my shoulders. Take me or leave me."

"Don't be brash. I'm not generally one of the kind that does favors for fun, and I'll ask you to do me a good turn to make up for it. It's lucky that I struck you, anyhow, or I might have had to go myself. But, keep your eyes open and come on."

The stranger once more stepped forward, and Harry followed, eying him keenly.

As far as could be told in that light he was a fine-looking man, of middle age, clad in the garb of the average mountaineer. He went ahead with a strong, free step, and without ever being at a loss. No wonder that Harper felt some curiosity as to who he might be. If there had not been so much need for anxiety about their safety some close questions might have been asked.

Once or twice it seemed as though they could hear voices away off; but from the moment they darted out of the cavern they saw no one.

The guide, enjoining silence, led the way through all the twistings and turnings of the difficult trail without ever appearing to be at fault. Dark and dangerous it was, at places, and Harper realized what slow progress, if any, he would have made had he been alone.

It was just daybreak when they fairly disentangled themselves from the mazes of the hills and came to a trail that was faintly visible.

"If I told you how far you have traveled you wouldn't believe me," said the stranger; "but you're out of the woods at last. Yonder lies your course. I wouldn't care if I was to follow it with you, but I have work elsewhere."

"Thanks! maybe we'll meet again," responded Harper. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"You're going to Git Thar," said the man, slowly.

"I'm not so sure that I'll make the raffle, but I'm this far on the way, and if good intentions count for anything I'm pretty sure to arrive."

"You will get there, too. I feel sure of it. You have done me one favor; will you do me

another? I am not in condition to offer you any direct recompense, but sooner or later you will find that you will not be the loser."

"That's all just as you take it. If you want anything, ask for it. Then, if you ever have the chance to get in any more work on my side of the house, do it. But don't promise too much. It makes me feel bad when I think how the butt end of all the promises I have ever heard of have panned out."

"Perhaps you are right. I'll tell you what I want, and you can say yes or no. At Git Thar you will find two children—a blind girl and a boy. They are watched over by two faithful colored people. I have a letter for the girl—Syringia is her name. Give it to any of the four, with my love, and if you choose you can say I will see them soon, and that, meantime, they shall trust no one there."

"Good enough! It shall be done. There's my hand on it, pard. Pass over the letter. Don't tell me too much—I can guess at all the rest; and if I can't, it won't make much difference. No, you needn't mention your name."

"A moment. I want to scribble a few words more. And, by the way, if you can get it to them without any one outside being the wiser it will suit better all around. Run your chances though, and however you accomplish the trust I won't grumble. Here's the document. Good-by, and steer clear of Major Sunshine. He'll be after you with a sharp stick, after this. May strike you before you reach the camp; and if he don't it won't be long till you hear from him. I'll keep an eye on the fun, for it may be worth the seeing, though I'd back his chances in the long run, for coin."

"You think? All right. We'll talk that up when I see you again. Good-by. Guess I can't miss striking the road?"

"No. It's plain as can be. Farewell."

The stranger without a name waved his hand and the two separated, each going his own way.

"I didn't ask any questions, and I didn't make many promises; but I've learned a thing or two, all the same," soliloquized Harry Harper.

"I won't have any confidences to keep, if the time ever comes when knowledge is worth coin. But I haven't found out what Sunshine wanted of me. And I don't know much more about Governor Bang's daughter than when we started. Maybe I'll find her at Git Thar; and maybe, if the trouble were known, she and Sunshine are swearing together over my mysterious disappearance. It looks as though she didn't strike that stage for nothing. I must have another look at her by daylight if I have to walk a few miles for it."

Thinking a good deal more in this strain, On Deck Harry strode along, with a tireless step, in spite of the rough experiences of the past night, and the present demands of a very keen appetite.

The letter he had thrust away in his breast-pocket, without more than a passing glance. Whether it held a mystery or not he did not trouble himself about its contents.

How far it might be to the camp was a matter of guess-work, and if he had had it to do over again it is possible that he would have asked some questions on the subject, though he was not, as a general thing, one of the inquiring kind, so long as he could find out the facts, by going ahead till he got to them.

He had walked so far, at last, without seeing any one that it began to seem as though he might keep it up forever; and yet, his wits were all the time about him. He saw a man sitting on a boulder some time before the man observed him and as he drew a little nearer he recognized Traveling Eli.

"They didn't get him, that's sure; and yet, he don't altogether look like a man that has spent the night in the bushes. Wonder if he will be condescending enough to recognize me? Anyhow, there'll be a chance to have some sort of a pard on the road to Git Thar. If I don't like him, after we arrive I can shoot him, so I don't perceive any objection to a closer view. If he takes the other chance and begins any nonsense, I suppose I'll just have to shoot him now. Hallo, there! what you trying to get through you? Retard your progress a little till we have a chance to swap lies a bit. You'll find that we all both belong in the same box."

His soliloquy ceased, and his vocal utterances began with suddenness as he saw Eli's hand swing around to his hip with a promptness that showed he had a strong inclination to shoot.

"Come fo'wards, then, an' let's see what yer look like. 'Pears ez 'thar war suthin' familyer 'bout yer jin'ral outfit. Hev I seen yer afore?"

"Of course you have. I assisted at your interview last evening with Johnny Goodman, and I was in the stage when Major Sunshine's supporters attacked it. I didn't know you had got done running, or I would have kept my eyes open for you. How far is it to Git Thar, or don't you know?"

"Put her right hyar, pard. I'm gladder ter see yer than ef I'd struck forty pound to ther ton. It's a good bit ov a stretch ter Git Thar, but I'd got in long ago ef I hadn't been roustin' round ter see ef you had gone over the range,

or war only gittin' ready ter go. Couldn't find hide ner huff ov 'em, er you'd 'a' seen me sailin' in like a bullgine on wheels."

"Mighty glad you didn't, Eli. I won't say a word against your good intentions; but from what little I've seen of your shooting I'd sooner be somewhere else when you begin. I heard several shots when they held the stage up; but I don't remember to have observed any one dropping. Next time, you run in the start, and I'll do my own shooting."

The little sport was in no good humor, and didn't mind showing it, though he was keeping his eyes open. He took the hand that was extended, but he did it rather gingerly; and a man with a thicker skull than Eli's could have seen how little of cordiality there was about him.

The traveler winked and then grinned.

"Ef it war wu'th while mebbe ther roarin' tiger from Tintown mou't show yer you war mistook. But in these hyar pipin' times ov peace—Oh, glory!"

With a suddenness that was startling, Eli rolled from the rock on which he had again seated himself, turning a back somerset as he went, and without losing a minute went driving into the convenient bushes, that at once screened him from sight.

Wisdom would have sent Harper at his heels; instead, he wheeled, with both revolvers drawn, to face what had frightened Eli.

By that time it was a shade late to retreat. On either side, at the distance of a dozen yards, were half a dozen men with aimed weapons, and nearest of all stood Lieutenant Starlight.

CHAPTER V.

THE TIN TIGER SHOWS HIS TEETH.

WITH a dozen revolvers aimed at On Deck Harry, if the road-agents had wanted to kill only, they would scarcely have waited. They might have had him down before he was fairly aware of their presence, for there was no doubt that there were good shots among them; and at the distance they could hardly all miss.

At once the idea struck him that they were willing to run some risks to take him alive, and the thought no doubt made him willing to extend several worthless lives. Though his weapons were aimed, his fingers did not tighten on the triggers. The odds were a little too great for even a regular chief to yearn to tackle.

"Stop right there!" he exclaimed. "It's daylight, and you observe I've got my hands full of tools. Maybe I can't scoop you all, but there'll be a thundering lot of men missing at next roll-call if you don't slacken up till this thing gets straightened out. What do you want with me?"

"Throw up your hands quick, and stand there till some one relieves you of those same tools. You are wanted back at headquarters—bad! When you get there you'll find out what for. You had a sure thing for a hemp necktie as it was; after that little clean-up at the cave it's dead certain."

"Might as well be shot then, and take a few more with me, out of the wet."

"Oh, no, you're not that kind of a man. We have you down fine."

"What do you mean?"

"You're willing to take the chance of something turning up in the long run. If you go out now, there is no long run."

"Ha, ha!"

Harper laughed genially.

"There's a heap of good sense in that; only it won't do you a bit of good. Don't come any nearer just yet. I'll kill the first man that lifts a foot nearer. There must be some understanding before I throw up my cards."

"You won't have any cards at all if you don't throw them down. Last time of asking. Surrender or take the consequences. Ready, boys?"

"Ready it is!"

On Deck Harry flung himself flat on his face, discharging his revolver as he fell.

And, just then, a wild cry arose in the rear of the squad stationed on his right hand, followed by the thunder of hoofs.

"R-r-r-a-gh! Cl'ar ther way fur ther tin tiger on ten wheels. Warp it to 'em, pard—Eli's comin'!"

Down the road flashed a squad of a dozen riderless horses, that raced together like a platoon of cavalry; and in the midst of them a single horseman, who yelled and shot again, as he came.

It was a solid attack, as well as a diversion; and one that it was not so easy to meet. The horses bounded forward in a mad stampede, sweeping toward the outlaws, a regular cyclone of trampling hoofs. Death only could stop them; and it was not so certain that death would come at the call of the road-agents, a couple of whom staggered away or dropped, while Eli, as he drew nearer, swung himself down, until he was concealed from sight, but shooting with a more than Indian skill from where he hung.

The surprise could not have been better planned, or more skillfully executed. There was no time to meet it; and when Lieutenant Starlight skipped nimbly to one side, his men unanimously followed suit, for the moment losing sight of On Deck Harry.

Perhaps they imagined they were safe to find him where he had fallen; but more likely they thought only of their own safety, or of taking in their desperate assailant.

While they watched Eli, Harper was acting. Springing from the ground, he bounded at the nearest horse, just as the squadron was swooping by.

The animal crowded away, but not far enough or fast enough to evade the hand that dropped on its mane. Another bound, and the man had floated lightly to the back of the steed, and was borne along in the still madder rush that followed, shooting as he went.

"Keno! Count 'em up fur Travelin' Eli, ther great patent annihilator. Did yer think I'd left yer, pard? Eli ain't them kind. I draw'd out ter git a chance ter kim with ther bulge, an' I'm all hyar now. Jest foller me an' I'll take yer inter Git Thar with lig rejoicin'. Down in front, thar, Eli's shoutin'!"

For a moment the rattle of firearms sounded like a little war; then the two had left the squad of outlaws behind, and, unhurt, were dashing along the trail.

"Oh, this war jest too much good-luck! Don't talk, pard, fur fear it may go bu'st jest at ther last minnit. Lay low an' crawl ahead. Five minnit; ov this 'll put us outen ther woods."

What damage had been done among the road-agents was not so easy to estimate, though Harper had seen more than one throw up his hands. The two had shot quick and often, and they knew how to hold.

After awhile the horses seemed to lose their frantic eagerness. First one and then another slackened its pace, and showed a desire to drop behind; nor did Eli appear anxious to hold the bunch together.

"No, pard, I wouldn't worry. Fact are, I'd sooner appear in Git Thar afoot than go whaling in on ther very pick an' posey ov all these prancin' chargers. 'Cause why? 'Cause thar ain't one ov 'em ez wa'n't stole in ther fu'st place. An' bein' ez we're strangers it mou't appear ter ther onregenerate mind ez happened ter recognize ary one ov 'em that we hed hed suthin' ter do with ther 'rigenal stealin'. Take ole Eli's advice. We'll canter 'long like beggars on hoss-back fur a bit yit, tell we git nigh ter ther camp; an' then, ef we ain't bed no bad luck an' bin hung er quartered, er otherwise boweled out by ther playful cusses we mou't meet on this trail, I reckon we'll head w'ot's left back'ards, give 'em a kick fur good luck, an' hoof it ez natur' intended us to, fur ther balance. I'd sooner stretch my legs than my neck, any day."

"All right, old man. I begin to see daylight again; but I have been wondering where you came across such an outfit. You didn't have it along with you in your vest pocket on top of the stage. That I'll swear to."

"An' yer wouldn't lose a durn cent a-doin' ov it. Ther cold, solid truth are these:

"I'd bin a kinder o' 'pishenin' thet things wa'n't prezactly on ther squar', an' keepin' my biggest eye peeled fer what might be in ther bresh. When they riz outen ther bresh forra'ds I riz inter ther bresh back'ards. It wa'n't no use ter stop tell I found room ter swing meself accordin' ter my size, an' I kept on a-goin', thinkin' you war comin' close behind."

"My idear war ter flank 'em, you onderstand, takin' 'em in ther rear, an' it jest did me some good, thinkin' ov all ther corpusses ez war paid fur."

"Then I come slap onter ther hull kerrel, a leetle off ther trail, an' one man thar, a-holdin' ov 'em. I salted him—you jest bet—an' then see'd my way cl'ar through. Ther agents must hev it in fur yer very bad, an' don't you disremember. They got onter yer trail an' laid out ter take yer alive, so they cashayed their live-stock, an' undertook ter crawl up."

"Ef Eli hadn't bin thar they'd stood a mighty smart chance ter make ther rifle."

"But he war 'round, big ez a b'ar, an' he jest took them hosses, drewed his irons, an' went fur all that war in ther pot."

"An' you chipped in like a leetle lord. I ain't got a word ag'in' yer snap ner sand. Fact are, you's jest ther pard I want. Ef yer mean biz, give me yer paw, an' I'll show yer how yer kin make Rome howl, an' fill yer pockets with rocks. I tell yer, honest, I want a man all nerve—an' you's jest them kind. Whatcher say? Pards, er no pards? Ef pards, you kin begin ter draw on me fur coin."

His tongue ran along like a mill-wheel when the race is full. If Harry Harper had wanted to, it would have been hard to stop him.

"If you had talked that way to me last night, when I had the biggest kind of a starter in my pocket, I might have hit you for fun, or smacked you one for good luck; but, as you didn't, and to-day is considerably different from yesterday, I might give the offer some considerable attention. I'm dead broke, you understand—turned my last cent over to the collectors, confound 'em! I'm a thousand dollars out, and nothing to fall back on. It's pretty tough, but if I don't strike you for wealth, I stand a mighty good chance to go without grub for the present. What's your idea? If you can convince me it's worth a bill of beans or a dead oyster I'm ready to believe in it. And if you can't, I don't see

that it would make much difference if you've got a little wealth that says it is. I'm in the market—till I make a raise."

"An' you don't keer much what it is—don't object ter a leetle danger ef ye'r earnin' a good pile ov money?"

"The truth, right from headwaters. I'm a man in the market, if you're rich enough to buy me."

"Ye'r wouldn't mind even ef it was a leetle tective work."

"I'm not objecting to anything, except your being so long-winded. I'm more than ever ready to take an oath that you're not as big a fool as you look. I have a few friends that I wouldn't give away; for the rest—I've got to live."

"Ye'r comin' round then, at last. Good enough! I had me eye on yer. Now this hyar Sunshine—how does it strike yer ter tackle him? Ye'r wouldn't mind gettin' even? Eh?"

"You've found the spot where I live. To tell you the truth, Eli," and here his voice dropped to an almost inaudible whisper, "if there's anything in this world that I'd rejoice at it would be to unmask the villain that's got my eleven hundred dollars. And—well, there's some other points I'll give you when we're a little better acquainted. I guess Brother Sunshine knew what he was doing when he went to all this trouble. I never heard of there being anything the matter with his memory, and—but we'll let that slack up for a bit. Time enough to tell the cold facts when we get the campaign started."

"Halleluyer! You're ther man I bin lookin' fur! Twixt you an' me, I've heerd ov you afore; an' they tole me ef On Deck Harry chipped on my say-so, I'd hev ther game more ner half won. Don't say anuther word. I've got a heap ov coin, an' what's mine's yourn. You'll find Eli a pard ter tie to, ef ye're willin' ter let yerself go."

"All right; I'm trying. But as you don't want a pauper for a pard, I would suggest that the first move should be a little advance payment; something to make me feel less like a dead beat, you understand, and that will be an earnest of the coin that is to come."

He looked a little quizzically at Eli as he spoke, but the man was equal to the emergency. In the most matter-of-fact way, his hand went into his pocket.

"That's a solid fact, pard. I don't want no sich dead beat 'round me. I ain't kerryin' all me wealth with me, but I kin gi'n yer what yer want in ther mornin' when I open my cache; an' hyar's fifty ez a starter. You kin sail in on that ter-night, fur I want yer ter tackle ther camp on yer own book an' git p'inters on one side, an' I'll go it alone an' git 'em on ther other."

"Thanks. You're the doctor, as long as we can pull together. What I can't get at, you can knock down. But we're not to work the camp together?"

"Not jest prezackly. You go in an' find a shemale ez they calls Jane Heth'rington, what claims ther Spread Eagle, an' freeze on thar. She an' Sunshine are gittin' up some kind ov game ter j'ne hosses, an' ther major'll be 'round ther camp ter-night, unless I'm 'way off. Don't want ter jest scoop him right on ther spot, ez that wouldn't suit ther men ez are backin' me. He's got ter be squeezed like a dish-rag fu'st; then it'll be time ter turn him over to ther law. You sabbe?"

"I think, perhaps, I do. You don't want the toughs at Git Thar to understand we're working this thing together. And you haven't made up your mind whether you'll play me fair to the end or not. I'll take my chances on that last; but I'd advise you not to draw out too sudden. Now, what's the lay of the land ahead?"

"Don't you fret. You'll find Eli all thar, ez long ez you stay with him. An' ez fur Git Thar—it's 'bout this way: Thar's a shanty a piece this side, a leetle off ther trail, ez we kin make headquarters when we wants ter chin a leetle. I've jest bought ther claim, yer onderstand, an' am a-goin' ter work it fur all she's wu'th. An' mebbe I'll be lookin' fur ther ger-loot ez salted it down an' rung it in on a pore cripple like me."

"Might have a better blind, and might have a worse one. We can see how it will work."

"Oh, it'll work all right. Ef any one drops to us it'll be jest Kunnel Starbiddle, ther boss ov ther camp, an' some ov his heelers. An' he ain't goin' outen his way ter p'fect Sunshine. He ain't no more use fur him then a dog bez fur six legs."

"Starbiddle? I've heard of him. Why not take him into confidence at the start?"

Eli gave a snort that was almost a groan.

"Him? 'Cause he's wuss ez a frien' than a snake in ther grass. Let him alone an' he won't hev no eetchin' ter hold ther long end ov ther string. I'd sooner hev him holdin' on me with his sixes, an' ther hammers drawn, than claimin' ter be ther biggest friend outen jail. In ther fu'st racket he mou't let up on er; but on ther second he allers kills. That's Starbiddle. But, don't yer be afeard ov him. He won't strike till he finds out what ye'r after; an' by that time mebbe you kin see yer way clear."

"If I haven't taken him in before that. All right. We'll work the camp for what it is worth, and Sunshine can look out for his hide."

CHAPTER VI.

THE STYLE AT THE PAY DIRT.

"R-R-R-A-GH!"

Everybody looked around at the ferocious growl, and Pius Pete pulled his revolver and began to shoot.

"If he didn't hit any one it was owing to general bad marksmanship. He always had to begin about ten minutes before any one else, and then didn't get there very frequently. It was generally understood that when he took a hand in he was to have an allowance to bring him somewhere on a level with the rest of the boys."

"Oh quit," said Billy Barker, taking him by the ear about the time he had got the third load off.

"Don't yer see the man's a stranger? You'll play that too often one of these days, and somebody that can shoot will let go. Let's hear what he's got to say. You quit or I'll begin."

Billy Barker generally spoke by card, and Peter knew he meant it, in spite of the honey that he put in his voice; so he quit.

The bullets must have gone somewhere near the stranger, though he gave no sign.

On the contrary, he repeated the growl with about a dozen variations, until every one in the saloon had a full chance to size up his looks.

Then he opened his mouth wide, and began to shout.

"I'm a solid yearthquake and a cyclone with fringes 'round ther edges! I'm ther royal Bengal tiger from 'way up ther krick, a tin tiger, ye gerloots, on ten wheels. When you hear me growl yer kin bet ther menadgery hez arroved, an' ther band wagon are jest pernamburlatin' ther town. Frien's an' feller ceterzuns, I'm ther bad man frum Bitter Krick, an' I've jest dropped in ter give yer a leetle common amusement. Pard, all, what'll yer hev?"

He concluded his brief tirade with a sudden drop in his voice, so that it was as gentle as a cooing dove's; and Pius Pete, with his eyes fixed longingly at the bar, and his lips working in an ecstasy of anticipation, made one step toward the bottles of his choice.

Again his evil genius, in the shape of Billy Barker, had him.

"Oh, come now, Petey. Don't throw dirt on all ther rest, ov Git Thar, an' make another dum fool ov yerself. Let's see what he's after. You kin bet he don't mean drink. Them kind never git here. It's some long-shanked game, an' I don't want ter see an old side pard like Pius Petey took in an' done fur. Jest wait, now, tell I give yer a pointer, an' then you'll know what ter do."

The rest of Git Thar seemed to be about of the same opinion, since there was neither move nor answer.

Git Thar was a bad place when it got started; but no man ever could say he didn't, in the start, get all the rope he wanted, to hang himself.

"What? Nobody talks? Nobody wants nothin'; an' ther hull crowd satisfied? Blame my eyes ef I ever struck cewd a contented crowd. Jest open yer years an' listen ter me, Travelin' Eli an' I'll tell yer what I've did, an' what I want. Arter that; wal, yer see this gold, boy? We'll peramburlate up ter ther long plank, an' ax Rapid Johnny ter sling out flooid p'ison fer all hands."

He held up a shining twenty-dollar gold piece as he spoke, and glanced over at the bar.

Even that did not elicit a responsive cheer. Either the crowd was in a sulky humor, or it did not take kindly to strangers.

Billy Barker, standing just behind Pius Pete's broad shoulders, moved no more than the rest, but he had a pleasant smile around his handsomely chiseled lips, and watched the proceedings with good-humored interest, while he communed with himself.

"Pears ter me this galoot is after smethin' a leetle more than common; an' that somebody in Git Thar knows jest what it are. Thar's ther kurnel, frinstance. It war good ez a circus ter see his face. Shouldn't wonder ef he had an eye ter ther stranger's welfare. I wouldn't hev him lookin' at me that way, not fur rocks. Bet yer high there'll be a mighty circus, and Travelin' Eli'll git all he wants, an' a leetle more, when he stirs up Kunnel Starbiddle an' his heelers. An' hyar's Petey, willin' ter sail in with his eyes shet; an' git everlastingly sallervated from both sides. Oh, my! What fools thar are in ther world!"

He had his eyes fixed straight on the man he meant by Colonel Starbiddle, and was watching him for some sign of how things were to go.

The colonel was the recognized father of the camp, the virtual alcalde, who settled what disputes he could at the point of his pistol, and the balance through the medium of a court which was as much Judge Lynch's as his own.

He was a small, but rather portly, comfortable-looking man.

What he said always went—and people did remark, in a quiet way, that he said a good deal more than was heard at large.

Yet Git Thar was a place where a great deal

was heard; and people were fond of listening up to a certain limit.

"And, brethring, ez I war goin' ter remark," continued Eli; and then—a mine suddenly seemed to explode under him; there was a report like a young cannon, followed by a scattering roll of infantile musketry, while the chair on which he was standing took an upward flight, shattering into a dozen pieces, in the midst of which there was a momentary vision of Eli, spreading in the air.

Colonel Starbiddle's face no longer wore its look of subdued expectancy, but instead expanded into the full moon of satisfaction, as he broke into a hearty laugh just an instant ahead of the roar that arose, first from his dozen of particular friends and cronies, and then from the balance of the crowd at the "Pay Dirt" Saloon. The practical joke, that had been "in soak" for an available opportunity, had culminated, and Travelin' Eli had been the victim.

The explosion would have frightened most men; but the tiger was scarcely subdued; and after the first bound his actions were almost as much of a surprise as the original shock had been.

The Pay Dirt was a one-story building some twelve feet in the square, and the ceiling didn't stop till it got up to the comb of the roof. And up, almost to striking distance of the comb went Eli, making a revolution at the highest point of his flight, and then dropping down like lead, feet foremost, upon one of the poker-tables by the wall.

There was a crash from the table; but Eli didn't stay there.

Once more he shot into the air, this time feet foremost, coming down hands first, on another table, with another smash.

Again he did not stop.

Twisting swiftly to his feet, he shot into the air; and now he had a revolver in each hand, and became a revolving ball of fireworks. Now here, now there, from chair to chair, from chair to table, and from table to bar he bounded, and at each leap he pulled trigger, first on one and then on the other of his self-cocking revolvers.

The performance was not down in the programme, and discounted Petey's late humble effort about five to one. To outsiders it was not certain that the whole thing from end to middle and back again had not been provided by Colonel Starbiddle; and therefore it was unsafe to chip. Then, again, those shots might be meant to stay, at random as they seemed to be slung. The outsiders were in the majority, and there were enough of them to make the racket at the Pay Dirt a perfect Bedlam. For a wind-up, about half the audience going out of the doors and windows, just as Eli, pausing on the top of the bar in his flight, extending his arms in an awkward gesture, exclaimed:

"Men an' brethring, amen! I won't say it ter-night—jist wait an' see."

Then, along the bar he turned a side-spring, or "cartwheel," by a dexterous twist of his heels raking the shelves behind the bar from end to end, and disappeared through a convenient window, amidst the sound of jingling and breaking glass.

"Wal, fur a racket that war unexpected, an' jist lifted ther kunnel onto his hind legs, I reckon that's high. An' when Starbiddle begins ter howl mebbe we'll find out what it's all about. Blame me ef I can tell now. From ther sample he gi'n us I sh'd say Eli war apt ter be a bad man when he gits on ther rampage. It's queer, though, that I never seen him afore. I've heerd ov most chiefs, but I never heerd ov him."

And this was a very true reflection. There were few mining-camps that Billy Barker had not visited, and he had interviewed chiefs without number.

Billy took a step or two toward the door, and then halted.

"I'd like ter talk to him a leetle; but jest now wouldn't be a good time. Ef I found him so would ther rest ov ther gang—fur they'll be lookin' aft'r him sharp. You bet, some ov ther kunnel's heelers hes started fur him a'ready. Ef they find him there'll be lively music, notwithstanding a joke's a joke, ez ther kunnel ses."

And when the stranger had departed the pandemonium at the Pay Dirt continued, though after a somewhat different fashion.

Those on the outside came running in, while those on the inside pushed to get out; and nearly every one shouted, all at the same time, raising a noise that would have deafened Babel.

In the midst of it all Colonel Starbiddle raised his hand.

Those that didn't see the motion had their attention called to it pretty forcibly by those that did.

The colonel was laughing—and it did the average man good to see and hear the portly colonel laugh. It was done so heartily, so jovially, so from the bottom of his boots, that any one could see how it was with him. Not a care on his mind, or a sorrow in his soul.

"Hold on, boys! This has just turned out too good for anything. Somebody—I won't say who, but you can guess as much as you have a mind to—set up a joke for the first man

that dropped naturally onto it, and the stranger happened to be the man. He kept the joke moving in a way that was quite handsome, if we didn't expect it; and he ought to be thanked as a public benefactor. You hear me? Any one caught monkeying around his band-wagon on account of this affair will be very apt to hear from me. But, if any one of you should happen to meet Eli, I would be much obliged if it was said to him that Colonel William Starbiddle would be pleased if he would send him his address, where a personal interview could be had; or, if he would call at the office of the Blue Jay Mining Company, and meet a gentleman who is inclined to be his personal friend. And now, Johnny, under the circumstances, the treat is on me. Set 'em up for the house."

This time Billy Barker did not object, so that Pius Pete got away up in the front rank, getting hold of the decanter one of the first of all. By the time the rest had followed suit, the reaction had arrived, and Eli, even if he had been there in person, would have been out of danger for the time being.

This being the case, Clem Taylor took the seat behind the table that he nightly held, for a long or short time, as patronage or profit demanded; and the game went on.

Of course there were three or four cappers, who bucked against the game, in season and out of season, just as the needs of the bank demanded, so that there was no danger but that Clem could have things looking red-hot in almost no time.

In fact, the great trouble was to keep these mighty hunters after the royal quarry down to the line of possible and practiced playing. Some were inclined to risk too much, and some too little; yet, as they had been pretty thoroughly drilled in private, and Clem had a lightning tongue, he succeeded in breaking them in pretty thoroughly.

It was just after Andy Shehan had entered on what he hoped would be the game of the season, that he was startled somewhat by the beginning of the campaign.

"I'll copper on the queen to the extent of the limit. You always have to take the fair sex contrarywise, anyhow."

The remark drew the attention of every one to the maker, since the voice was that of a stranger.

Not a bad-looking fellow did they see, planking down his chips in the way he had indicated. He was just a little over the medium height, but so well put together that it would not be the easiest thing in the world to guess at either his stature or his weight. He was dressed in rough-and-ready style, two revolvers swinging conspicuously at the belt that also confined a bright, clean red-flannel shirt, and supported a pair of brown corduroy pants, the bottoms of which were rolled up around the legs of the boots that were a little bit finer than any other pair in camp.

He was a stranger to everybody, yet the boys felt a peculiar interest in his welfare, and one or two at once backed the green to win, though a whisper went 'round, several times repeated, that maybe he was a bad man to buck against, and it would be as well for Git Thar to make up its mind to hang together.

"Queen wins," said Clem, coldly, as the gentle lady came out on his side of the house, and he drew in the stranger's chips, and then shoved over their proportionate share to the men that had backed her straight.

"Good enough," muttered the man in the red shirt, as he threw down double the amount of his previous bet. "I don't like to win the first bet anyhow. 'I'll just try it again."

"Queen loses."

This time the stranger had it, and there were not so many smiling.

"And now I'll get down to business," he continued, as he drew in his winnings and looked over the lay-out. "Money talks, and I'm going for your old meat wagon, heavy. Make or break you'll find me all in town."

And Clem Taylor did find him in town, for the next half dozen times, since he was there every time, and always won, until he piled up double the limit on the last turn.

"Won again!" he exclaimed with a triumphant wave of the hand. "Fact is, when I go for scalps I always get them. Say, boys, while Clem mixes the cards what will you all take?"

For just an instant there was a dead silence, and then there was the spat of a pistol ball and a loud report, the strange young man falling to the floor like lead, with a round, blue mark on his forehead.

The stranger was dead.

CHAPTER VII.

THE WAITING WAIFS.

FOR a moment after the fall of the stranger there was silence. The frequenters of the Pay Dirt were accustomed to every kind of racket, and were not so wonderfully horrified at this, yet they had sense enough to see that it was rough on so utter a stranger, and they listened for a moan or a sigh, in the hope that he had not entirely disappeared beyond the range.

Then the talk went on. There was no wild

excitement; but mortal men could not help in a general way inquiring who fired that shot.

Billy Barker was the nearest to the stranger when he fell, and without caring who might object he sprung to his side, though even before he had softly raised his head he knew that he was dead.

"Plumb through ther forehead," he said quietly, looking up.

"Gentlemen, this galoot won't kick again. It was a dirty, snide trick, whoever done it, an' Billy Barker says so. Fur ther sake ov this camp yer orter show who didn't do it, anyhow, ef yer don't want ter hev a neck-stretchin' frolic arter findin' out who did."

"Oh, dry up, old man. You didn't do it, 'cause I was lookin' that way. We'll jest lay him back tell we see ef anybody claims ther corpus. If not I'll pay for ther store-box an' see that he's planted in style. A man that goes under at the Pay Dirt is always sure of a good send-off. He has his chips all cashed. Put the money in Starbiddle's hands. If any friend claims it, it will be paid. You hear Clem Taylor shoutin'?"

The dealer spoke coldly, but he meant all he said. Laying down the box and cards he even made a step or two forward, and would have been better than his word if the boys had not taken the matter out of his hands, several speaking up.

"Hold on, Clem, you'll spoil your store clothes. We'll put him whar you want him. Only show us."

"And I," interjected Starbiddle, who at first stood motionless, "will guarantee a square trial and a hemp neck-tie on the man who did this job. In all my life I never saw a meaner one. And the worst of it is that nobody knows when his turn will come, too. This is the third or fourth case of the kind that has happened here. It strikes me a little sort of a trial wouldn't be out of place; and if we find the right man to practice on, better have the neck-stretching as soon as possible after that is over."

"That's square, colonel; but all the camp knows your style. Put him in hvar till mornin'; an' meantime you kin be roustin' around, lookin' fur ther friend as sent him over ther divide. It ain't fur ter look; but it won't be so easy ter find him. That's bin tried afore."

Clem threw open a door that led to a little cuddly hole of a room; though it was the one in which he generally slept.

Assisted by a number of willing hands Billy Barker carried the corpse in and laid it softly in the bunk. Then they went out, the door was closed; and the game went on.

Billy Barker could hold his own with the crowd in most ways, but he was not quite as callous as the rest; and though he generally had a hand in the game at the Pay Dirt, first or last, this evening he could not get down to business. It might be that he was only a little off color, or it might be that he took some sober warning out of the colonel's words.

Who could tell whose turn was going to come next. It was certain that Billy was in the direct line of promotion, since, after a manner, he was an outsider, and in all Git Thar it was doubtful if he could pick out a solid friend, unless it might be Pius Pete—and he didn't count for much with the tough citizens who ran the camp, in spite of the fact that he was a recognized favorite.

Pius sand the town could recognize and admire, even if it was willing to get away with it promptly when it seemed likely to be directed in the wrong way; but a blundering sort like Pete, that, in the goodness of his heart, was always chipping in at the wrong time and place, and never making it count, was not very likely to command much respect, though for the sake of the fun Petey was endured.

"I just wonder," thought Barker, "why they never went for me. I've been in everybody's way, and I've had a shy at about everybody's wallet in the burg. There was a little foolishness at first, but they gave me fair play even when I came out jaybird, and now that I have a private graveyard the supply of stiff's seems to be getting scant."

"But this fellow that is getting in the fine work wouldn't care for my bluffs. He just rakes in the pot before you even have time to see the size of your hand. He's a mighty good shot, whoever he is. I've seen the trick worked three times—by the same man, I should judge—and if he has a mind so to do he might tumble half the camp without any one being the wiser. My turn next, eh? Who knows? It's time to be looking a little out, and if I can't find the man—and plug him—it's barely possible that I had better see what the climate feels like at some other section of the globe. Think I'll have to try and pump Petey. I saved the old reprobate's life once or twice, and if he has sense enough to work the cards right, I might as well try for a pointer. Ah!"

His thoughts ran along in better language than he generally used; and if one looked at him sharply, it would not be so hard to imagine that he had seen days that were a good deal better than the present ones.

The explanation was so audible that probably

a dozen men heard it, though it passed unnoticed, since all eyes were directed toward the door, through which two persons had just entered.

It was no new sight at the Pay Dirt, though one that never wearied the frequenters of the saloon.

"He's not here," piped a childish treble. "It's no use to look. When he gets back don't you think he will come straight home? Don't go any further, Sv. The room's full of people, and they may not like it if we get in the way."

"But if it is so full how can you tell that he is not here? Go around among them all. Look in every face. He said he was coming here about this time; and father always keeps his word."

Then the two advanced into the room.

The first speaker, as his voice indicated, was the merest child—a fragile, delicate boy of not over twelve at the utmost.

His face had an innocent look, his long hair, soft as a girl's, flowed along his neck, and down over his shoulders, in a glistening wave of ebony; his eyes, in spite of their black brilliancy, had a mournful look about them; while, from his movements, as he came forward, one could imagine the shrinking with which he faced such a crowd.

Yet, if he did not know that the camp almost to a man felt more than friendly to him he must have been very obtuse indeed.

Pet was what everybody called him, without any reference whatever to the full name by which he might have gone in a more civilized neighborhood, and Pet was what he had been called ever since that night when the strange pair dawned in on the Pay Dirt, and Colonel Starbiddle knocked Ira Joyce endways for undertaking a little of the free-and-easy talk for which he was renowned.

His companion was almost too handsome for description. Just a little shade above the average height of womanhood, she had a supple, swaying figure, the tiniest feet and hands, a countenance that baffled description until a few more words were added to the dictionary.

Her mouth was a rosebud, and her hair was pushed back from her broad, low, white forehead in a careless mass of short, crisp curls. It was only when one got a glimpse of her eyes that he saw the one thing wanting. Their orbs fell upon him with a dull, stony gaze that told the story of their sightlessness, and saddened the admiration of a moment before into pity.

How the two came to choose Git Thar as an abiding-place no one had ever been able to discover.

They had come silently, and taken possession of a stout little cabin at the edge of the camp. At the same time an adjacent shanty had received two other occupants, though it was some days before it was discovered that the two contrabands, with the blackest of coal-black faces, and the blind girl and her handsome little brother were in any way connected.

Even then it was uncertain what their relations were and had been, though from the way all parties acted there was an impression that the colored people had at one time been the slaves of the family, and had clung to the diminished fortunes of the children when all their relatives and friends had vanished.

For a time the contrabands had no names, and were only known as "them niggers at the Forks," but eventually they received the appellations of Milkweed and Butternut, which the two adopted without question, and answered to readily.

In and out of the shanty of the blind girl and her brother they were seen to go; and when the "chillun" wandered from home, one or the other, or both, generally, came not far behind them. It was odds of two to one that they were waiting somewhere outside now, though what they could do was a matter of amused inquiry with the men who noticed them.

Perhaps the "chillun" knew of their presence and felt encouraged by it.

The men of Git Thar knew no more than the reader what the couple were after; and to tell the truth they didn't much care, because they liked them anyhow. The boys simply stood back in silence as Pet took his sister's hand and gently led her around the room, peering earnestly into each face as he passed.

It was a singular exhibition of the power that innocence sometimes has; and Billy Barker watched it with the curiosity with which he viewed everything in and around Git Thar.

"Lovely is no name for it," he was thinking to himself, "but she's got no business here. Ef they once thought she had a hank on 'em that might do real damage, they'd turn and tear her like so many tigers. You're a white, innocent lamb, little one; but walk quiet ef you don't want ter hear ther howl ov ther wolves. Saints an' angels! What's struck the gal now?"

In her walk she suddenly paused, and for a moment stood silent, her hand upraised, her head thrown back, a look of horror in her face.

Then her voice rung through the room.

"Hold, brother; go no further! Do you not see it? Look! There! Accursed be the hand that shed it; and one day, soon or late, heaven will avenge it! You wolves! You tigers! You beasts of prey! Howl for the vengeance that

will come upon you! He has not yet come, brother, let us go."

Her voice dropped as suddenly as it had raised; she caught once more her brother's hand, and took a step forward as though to lead him from the room. In the excitement of the moment she bade fair to reverse the natural order of things. Though she had been led thither, passion seemed to give her the ability to lead away.

Nobody appeared to think of stopping her—the men of Git Thar fell back respectfully, in order to allow her to pass—and in another moment the visit would have been over.

Then, once more, a stranger appeared—a stranger to Git Thar though the reader has already met him. He had been standing in the doorway for some little time.

"Excuse me, gentlemen, I should judge there was a performance here, not exactly down on the bills. What is it all about?"

At the first sound of the strange voice a sharp cry rung through the house. Then the girl fell flat on the floor, the look of death in her face.

CHAPTER VIII.

A GENERAL BLUFF.

THE sudden scream and fainting of the girl momentarily paralyzed the spectators, thus allowing the voice of the stranger to be heard, as it would not have been a moment later.

Then, as her cry was echoed by one from Pet, Colonel Starbiddle glided forward and raised the girl from the floor, just as the greater part of the crowd indignantly faced the young man.

He did not seem to mind the scrutiny a bit, though Pius Pete was not the only one there that had a revolver out and ready. He stood quietly leaning against the door-frame, as handsome, well made, neatly dressed a young fellow as ever showed his face at the Pay Dirt.

"Oh, you needn't growl at me," he said quietly to Pius Pete, who was, as usual, inclined to get to the front. "I'm an old-fashioned traveler, that won't say boo to a goose if it keeps out of my way; and don't care a continental for a lion that gets in it. I see a lady in distress and I want to know what's been going on. 'On Deck Harry' is my name, and when you want me you'll always find me there."

"You'll find out all erbout it in a holy minnit, soon ez ther leetle damsel gits able ter talk. I ain't sayin' nothin', on'y keepin' yer kinder kivered like, till ther boss gits ready ter talk. Then you'll git it straight—an' mebbe heavy, ef you've bin trompin' round ther toes ov our leetle daisy."

"Ah, I should remark. You're a master hand to cover both ends of a barn door with a single six; but it don't look as though you had a very fine bead on me. I don't think it would trouble me much, even at this distance. But, I see I have made a mistake. The young lady is in the hands of her friends, and I have obtruded on quite a family party. Pardon me, but is there anything that I can do in the emergency? How was she taken?"

He advanced toward the little group that surrounded Pet and his sister.

Colonel Starbiddle had by an emphatic motion of his hand waved the crowd back, only accepting the assistance of Billy Barker, who gravely felt the pulse of the patient; and Clem Taylor, who came with a glass of water in one hand and a bottle of whisky in the other.

"We don't want to make any mistakes on this," said the colonel, looking up grimly.

"When Git Thar does, it's generally of a kind that can't be remedied. You may be a friend of this young lady and then the camp will swear by you. You may be something else. We'll know when she comes around."

"I should judge it was something else, then," was the cool answer. "I'll swear I never saw her before."

"Then, what in the name of wrath did you interfere for? It was the sound of your voice that caused her to throw up her hands and drop. You don't know her? Tell that to the marines. She knows you—and I doubt if it's any good either."

"Softly, my fat friend. It appears to me that she was talking to the crowd with the bark all on, saying something about vengeance, and all that. It was no more than natural that a stranger should suppose she had met with insult or injury. If I was mistaken I am willing to apologize—or fight. To On Deck Harry it don't make a particle of difference which."

The young man retained his lounging position, there was a smile on his face, and not a sign of a weapon about his clothes. Really, if the colonel chose to make one of those famous snap-shots of his, as he had more than once done on slighter provocation, the stranger had a first-class chance for a through ticket to Kingdom Come.

But something seemed to hold Starbiddle's hand. His face flushed a trifle at hearing himself called a fat friend; but he gave no answer, and turned soothingly to Pet who was hanging in mingled distress and alarm over his sister.

Evidently the lad was too excited to note and understand the signs of returning consciousness that began to show themselves in her face.

"There, there! It is nothing. She will be all right in a few moments. Who is this young man? Do you know him?"

Pet could understand the encouragement in the colonel's voice, and even seemed to comprehend his questions, for he looked up at On Deck Harry.

But there was no recognition in his eyes as he shook his head slowly.

"Sy may know him—I don't."

Then to his sister:

"Speak to me, Sy. Tell me you are not dying. Oh, what was it? Your hands are so cold, your face is so white! I am afraid; oh, I am afraid!"

The childish wail pierced through the semi-unconsciousness and brought the returning color back in a wave. First there was a feeble effort; then a stronger one. The girl straightened up, her hand closing tightly over that of her brother, while she looked around her, as though her poor, sightless orbs could peer through the darkness of the curtain before them.

"Do not fear, Pet. It was nothing—it shall not happen again. But I was so worked up; and then, that voice! Who was it spoke? Did you not hear him? Has he gone?"

She had drawn his head down and was whispering softly into his ear. He alone heard her questions; yet he did not think she wished to keep them from the rest, and he answered aloud:

"No, he is here yet. He is standing near you now. Who is he?"

Something of the old excitement came back, though her voice rose, fuller and clearer, so as to be distinctly audible.

"Tell me, quick! What does he look like? Is he tall and slender, with thick, dark-brown curls?"

"No, little Sy, he does not look like that, at all."

"And black eyes—oh, so black?"

"No, sister, his eyes are blue. It must be some one else. I do not know him at all. Come, let us go home. Thank you all, gentlemen, but she is better now, and needs no further help. Will you please let us go? There is nothing to keep us here, and the hour is growing late."

"Certainly, my son, certainly," answered Colonel Starbiddle, to whom the words seemed addressed.

"But we, as your friends, are interested to know the cause of your sister's illness. If she would tell us—or tell me—we might save her a recurrence."

"Do not speak of it," broke in the young girl, pleading in her tone.

"It was all a foolish fancy that struck me when my mind was worked up. I should have known better. He has been dead for years—for years."

"Who, Miss Sy? A friend or a foe?"

The colonel persisted in his search for information, though it was hardly after his usual manner.

"Let that pass. It can do no good to mention it now. Come, Pet, we will go home."

"And Colonel Starbiddle," said Pet, laying his one hand on the colonel's arm, while with the other he pointed to On Deck Harry:

"See that he comes to no harm. I may want to see him to-morrow."

The lad spoke quite impressively; and then, without waiting for an answer, the two moved toward the door.

"Bless my soul, no!" answered the colonel hastily, as he looked after the retreating two. "He is as safe with us here as if he was in a church. Any friend of yours, you know, will be able to command all Git Thar. I will see you to-morrow, and if I can be of any assistance sooner, send for me."

Then in silence every one watched the brother and sister go out, hand in hand.

That is, every one but On Deck Harry, who was eying Pius Pete with a smiling curiosity, as though he had found one of the representative men of the camp, and the result was amusing.

As the two vanished from sight, the colonel turned away, and was met by Pete.

"On'y say ther word, kunnel, an' I'll jest everlastingly sallervate him. He's a nasty sort er a cuss, an' hadn't orter be in Git Thar, anyhow."

"Tut, tut, Pete. From the looks of the stranger, I should say that you couldn't salivate one side of him. And you heard what I said to the children? I meant it, every word. If the man lets you alone, you let him alone, or there will be some bad trouble in the camp."

"Thanks, Colonel Starbiddle, you hit the nail square on the head that time," said Harper, right at the colonel's shoulder.

"I'm the most peaceable man you ever heard of as long as there is no one trying to crowd me; but when I begin to feel a pressure I'm mighty apt to cut loose, and make Rome howl. I don't want to detain you, but as you seem to be a representative man, and a gentleman of sense, and as I'm a persistent sort of a cuss, anyhow, I'd like to know what the young lady was saying just as I came in. She was on a high horse of some kind, and I'd like to know what she was talking about."

The colonel gave the stranger a straightfor-

ward stare, that might have confused some men, but did not have any visible effect with him.

"You don't care to remark, eh? Looks as though the family might not be as harmonious as you're all letting on. I don't want you to rake up anything disagreeable on my account, though. The secret will keep, no doubt, and I can get full information in the morning from the young lady herself. I came in here for another little bit of knowledge, that perhaps you can give me, and then I won't trouble you any more. Can you inform me where I will find a lady by the name of Jane Hetherington?"

The latter question seemed as unanswerable as the first, though for a different reason.

There had been some talk about justice and punishment in connection with the murder, but that had been pretty much forgotten until the girl had brought the subject back. How little enthusiasm she had awakened Starbiddle really did not care to mention.

But in regard to Jane Hetherington, though it might seem a little strange, there were very few who could answer the question, and the rest did not care to.

On Deck Harry was quick to read the signs.

"Ah, no one knows. What a pity. I supposed that she was quite well-known here. Has an interest in some mining-property I believe, and needs a manager something like me. So Johnny Goodman said. As I was cleaned out, lock, stock and barrel, on the way over, I thought I'd interview her. If there's not more coin there than this indicates it's scarcely worth while."

At that Pius Pete found voice.

"Sure ez yer live, he means Black Moll, ther woman ez runs ther Spread Eagle. I wouldn't advise yer to go snoopin' round her quite so fresh. She's her own boss, an' she hates a stranger like p'ison. She'll tell yer ter git, an' ef yer don't go lively you kin be measured fur a wooden overcoat."

"The Spread Eagle! Yes. It appears to me that was the name. Where did you say I could find her?"

"I dunno ez I said anything 'bout findin' her; but ef you'll jest go right out to ther other end ov town an' commence howlin' round a leetle, an' throw a couple ov big rocks at ther door ov ther shanty ez sets by itself on the left hand side, ther woman thet rises on yer with a double-barr'l shot-gun 'll be Moll."

"Thanks for your information. I will try and find her from the very general sort of description you have given me. Then, if she don't keep me too long, I may see you all later."

He gave a graceful wave of his hand, that included everybody, a nod of the head meant specially for the colonel, and left the Pay Dirt without any one offering to stop him.

"Gone to j'ine Eli, I reckon," suggested some one, and there was a laugh all around, though there was not much merriment in it.

"If we are going to have many more visiting strangers to-night you may as well close that bank of yours, Clem," said the colonel, lightly.

"There's been a regular rush of them, and more fun than pleasure about them, too. If my eyes don't deceive me, this On Deck Harry is going to turn out the worst pill there was in the box. Anybody here ever hear of him before?"

The colonel looked around in his fatherly way and waited for the answer that was some time coming.

"Nobody ever did, eh? Well, it does seem a little odd that no one knows such a sandy little bantam. It appears to me that I have seen him, and I've been trying to place him. How is it, Clem? Do you remember him?"

"I've seen him," responded the dealer after a momentary hesitation.

"It wasn't the same name, nor even the same voice or face, but if I'm not 'way off it was the same person."

"And where was it, Clem, where was it at?"

"Down in the southern country. Don't weigh in against him with an idea that he's a no-account little galoot, for he's a heap bigger than he looks, and just as good as they make 'em. I haven't much more to tell about him, except that I saw him on the floor once with three Greasers on top of him, with every man a knife out, playing for his short ribs. I left about that time, and I never knew how it turned out; but he must have got away. He's here now, and I'll bet the full limit of the bank that all of the Greasers couldn't come if they wanted. Moll would have a rustler for a boss if she had him, but somehow it strikes me that ain't in his line. I don't believe they'll bitch; an' he ain't ther sort of man that tells his biz. You bet he's got something better in his eye or he wouldn't be here."

CHAPTER IX.

MR. HARPER MAKES AN EVENING CALL.

THE story in regard to the young man who now sported the title of On Deck Harry was interesting to the sports at the Pay Dirt; but no one did it interest more than Billy Barker. He did not show it in his face; but in all the crowd there was none that listened more closely, and at the conclusion he tapped Pius Petey on the shoulder, and then quietly withdrew. After a wait of a few minutes outside, Petey came also.

"Wal, what yer want? You've got ther call on me, an' when yer say come, you'll allus find me 'round, but I sw'ar I'd like ter know what sorter biz are in ther air now?"

"That's what I'm after myself, Petey; and as I didn't know of anybody I'd sooner have as a pard in the venture, I tipped you the wink. What do you suppose a man like that stranger wants, roustin' around this time ov night, inquirin' fur Black Moll?"

"Mebbe he's her long-lost brother; mebbe he's a pard from ther East, goin' ter set up ther stamps ter arm that mine ther boys war talkin' about; mebbe he's goin' down ter cut her throat an' sack ther shanty. How kin I tell?"

"Well, don't be in such a bad humor about it. It only struck me that you'd like ter know."

Petey scratched his head.

"In gen'ral, ther man ez plays me fur a nat'ral-born fool don't go so fur from hittin' ther turn; but—wal, you heard how it was yourself. What sorter gerloot do yer think I am ter want ter go monkeying 'round On Deck Harry?"

The indignation in Pius Pete's voice was so earnest that it was laughable; but Billy did not even smile.

"You think I'm not paying much of a compliment to your judgment; but ain't I going myself? All I'm after is to have some one 'round to tell the boys how it happened, if I go over the range. Brace up a little an' come along. You sha'n't be hurt."

"That's your say-so. But Petey don't back down till ther game's started; an' he don't mind goin' a piece ov ther road ef yer don't expect him ter stay when it gits ter cold lead an' steel. 'Bout that time you'll find he ain't thar."

"I believe you're a bit of a humbug. But, anyhow, you're the best I've got, so come along."

"Really, now, does yer think that? Mebbe Petey are like ther singed cat—a heap sight better than he looks. But he ain't a-braggin'—he ain't a-braggin'. Jest sail in, an' see ef he folers yer."

"All right; we'll try it on," responded Barker, and the two went gliding down the street together.

Although they had been looking keenly around while they were talking, no signs of On Deck Harry had they seen; yet they started off without any hesitation, since the inquiry the stranger had made in regard to Jane Hetherington was enough of a hint for any reasonable human being.

And yet there never were two men more badly fooled. On Deck Harry had not gone in that direction at all.

When he came out of the Pay Dirt, he looked up and down the street like a man that wants to make himself certain of his bearings, and then he turned and went silently and rapidly in a direction just contrary to that in which the cabin of Black Moll was supposed to lie.

He hardly seemed to count on being followed, though if he was, so quick and silent were his movements, if it was not done very quickly, any one who desired to strike his trail would be apt to miss it altogether.

Just beyond the outer edge of the camp two roads stretched out, the one running to the northeast, the other to the northwest; and the locality was known as "The Forks." In spite of the trails it was a lonesome place, and it was not likely to get more cheerful-looking soon, since there was not much room for growth in that direction. The ground was broken and rocky until it rose into the mountain, whose face the twin canyons gashed.

On Deck Harry did not seem to consider these things, and was striding along with his rapid silent step when he heard the click of a gun and the low hail:

"Halt, who goes dar. You speak mighty quick now er you ketch um solid!"

"Don't be a fool," was the answer, without any signs of start or dismay. "If that's you, Butternut, don't lay there skulking in the bushes, but come out and have a square talk with a man that has got something to say to you."

"I, golly! Dis be Butternut, suah 'nuf; but who be you; an' what yer want wid dis ole dark?"

"Very good in you, old man, to keep such a sharp lookout; but it wouldn't be so nice if you were to slaughter the wrong man. I don't suppose you know who I am, so it's no use to tell you; but I came your way to see if I couldn't do a good turn to all parties concerned, and particularly to the children of Colonel Carden. I want to speak to Miss Syringia, and I don't want any one else to hear what I've got to say. If you'll keep your shotgun turned down this path while I go on up to the cabin you'll do us all a great favor."

"But, whah—whah, di—did you come f—from; an' wh-wh—who be you? Suah ez my name's Butternut I've see'd you afoah."

The colored man was more earnest than ever; and he spluttered and stuttered in a ludicrous way.

"Take a good look at me, Butternut, and I'll bet rocks on it that you won't think so. I didn't come from any place in particular, and I'm go-

ing back again just as soon as I can get there, but before I go I must have that talk with Miss Sy. So don't waste any more time. If you think best, run ahead and tell her On Deck Harry is coming. I don't know what sort of an arrangement you have here, and I don't want to meet Milkweed laying for me with a flat-iron. I'd rather risk your shotgun. Well, eh! You're satisfied now, are you? Never saw me before?"

"'Clar' ter glory, massa, I can't make it out. Yer tones is mighty famiyer, but I don't remember yer face. I'll take ther risk on yer looks, though. Jest mosey 'long up ther trail, You'll know when yer git thar. Ther youngsters don't go ter sleep jist so airly, an' you'll find 'em around an' ready."

Harry shrugged his shoulders and passed on. It seemed a little strange that he should spend so much time at an outpost; but probably he had his reasons. If he had looked back he might have seen the contraband staring after him with a wondering and altogether puzzled look.

"The dark is willing to swear that he recognizes, but somehow he can't just hit on a name for me. Wonder if the little damsel will be of the same mind. Mebbe it would simplify matters if she was; perhaps it wouldn't. Who knows? We'll go on and see. There's the light now from their cabin window. If it wasn't such bad manners I'd like to peek in and see what the chicks are about. But I guess I'd better not. It wouldn't look so wholesome if I was caught. Here goes, by the door, as a gentleman ought to."

He approached the cabin with a careless tread, and lightly applied his knuckles.

The sounds of a conversation that he could hear going on within immediately ceased, and without even the expected challenge to know who was there the door flew open, little Pet standing just beyond the frame, looking eagerly out into the darkness.

"Good-evening little one. I know it's rather late for visiting, but if you've got the time I'd like to have a little chin music with you and your sister."

There was the sound of a light footstep beyond the boy. His sister had crossed the room and stood at his shoulder, her face turned toward the visitor, while she listened intently to his every word.

"We don't know you," answered Pet, "but your face looks honest, and we will hear what you have to say. Excuse me for meeting you so; but we must be ready to protect ourselves, Sy and I. And we can do it. Come in."

He made a slight gesture with his right hand, showing that he held a revolver, low down but pointed very straight.

On Deck Harry followed the motion with his eyes, and uttered a short laugh.

"That's right, my little bantam. Hold it just that way for all your visitors. Don't let 'em get close to you, and at the first move that looks like foul play blow 'em through. That's good enough; and don't you trust me more than any one else. It's a bad plan to get careless, and you can set it down as a solid fact that around Git Thar you can't make any true friends. What's the matter, Miss Carden? You look as though you were surprised, or shocked, or something that way."

"Who are you, sir? What do you want? How do you know my name? I heard your voice at the Pay Dirt, some little while ago, and it sounded strangely familiar, yet I must have been mistaken. The dead do not return to life."

"Scarcely," responded Harper.

"At least, I wouldn't be willing to take many chances on it. It's a sure thing that you never saw me. I am On Deck Harry. I am neither the worst nor the best in the box. I fell among thieves on my way here, and I'll have to hustle around a little if I don't want to starve. But I've a message and a letter for you."

"A message! A letter! Who from? Oh, can it be—"

"Just as like as not, but really I can't say. If I was to guess, I would say the man who sent them was Reginald Carden, but maybe I'm 'way off. I can tell you the message, and the letter ought to speak for itself. He said:

"Don't you trust a living soul in Git Thar, not even the man that brings this. Keep your eyes open, for you know what, and I'll be along as soon as convenient."

"But you can tell me more of him, can you not? Where is he now; how does he look; when will he get here?"

"You can't prove anything by me. I met him in the dark; I hardly saw his face, and he didn't say when he would arrive. I've told you just what he said. He seemed to be afraid that maybe I'd lose the letter, and so gave me a little for word of mouth. The balance is written out, no doubt. Better let Pet read it to you. Then, if you want to ask any questions, I'll be around. If you don't want to talk, I'll skip. I've got a heap big lot of business on hand in Git Thar, and I don't figure on making a long stay, either. Just go off in the corner, and I'll hold my ears shut. I don't hear very well, anyhow."

Pet held the letter in his hand while he watch-

ed and listened. At the advice he caught his sister by the wrist, and led her aside.

For a few moments their whispers were heard, though the words were unintelligible. Then Miss Syringia turned.

"Thank you, a thousand times I thank you. And we both beg your pardon. We did not believe in you at first; but now we know that we can trust you, if needs be. This letter is from Reginald Carden, and he speaks of you as his true friend, and one who has saved his life, and who can be trusted."

"Oh, you're piling it on a little too steep. It must have been some other fellow that did all that. But, if you have any other questions to ask, or remarks to make, say 'em quick. I ain't got long to tarry, and, though I'm not much of a hand at conundrums, I don't want to go away and leave you unsatisfied. There might always be a regret that you didn't mention something."

"You are making fun of us now, though I can tell that you are not doing it with a bad heart. And I know that you are not afraid for yourself. What is it that you fear for us? We have no enemies here; every one has been so good to us."

"That's right. Let them be as good to you as they want to; but don't forget to look out for the claws under the velvet. They will cut loose some day, and then you will be surprised at the way your best friends perform. Haven't I been there, and don't I know?"

"Perhaps you are right. Will you take an answer to this letter? You may see father again."

"Heaven forbid! I don't yearn after it, anyhow. The last interview was plenty sufficient for a young man of my delicate nerves. If you're quite done I'll be going."

"Nothing. Yet—bark!"

She held her hand up as though in warning; and On Deck Harry, who was just about turning away, stopped to listen.

In the distance was a shot and a cry.

The waifs drew toward each other by instinct. One of Pete's hands held the revolver at a ready; the other clasped one of Syringia's.

"What was that?" whispered the girl, her face showing her excitement.

Harper moved to the door and listened; but no sound was to be heard from without.

"Reckon Butternut has met some sort of a Git Thar epidemic; but I judge that he knows what to do in such emergencies. He will no doubt fire and fall back if there is a sign of trouble. The next thing is to consider what I am to do. If we can get around it in any way, I don't want the genial citizens of this thriving camp to find out that I was this way at all. They might think I had been trying to throw dust in their eyes; and that puts an unregenerate man in a frightful bad humor. Just keep silent about On Deck Harry if any questions are asked, and I think it will be a heap better for all of us in the end."

"I shall certainly be silent if I can. But, suppose you are seen going from here. What can I say?"

The girl was much cooler and very earnest.

"Oh, avoid questions altogether, and then you will have no need to worry. If they come at you, say you don't know what they are talking about. Of course it would be a little picnic to manage a story that would wash, and for fear it wouldn't, I'd just sooner say nothing at all. Git Thar isn't ready to do you any harm, and if it is, I'll be 'round. Day-day. I'll see you all later."

He went out of the door, and the children were left alone, scarce able to decide whether he was friend or foe, and full of vague imaginings of what had happened, and what was going to happen.

After a little Syringia spoke.

"Pet, you must go."

"Where? For what?"

"To find out what has happened to Butternut. He has put himself into danger on our behalf, and we must not forsake him."

"But you? I cannot leave you alone. Oh, if that stranger had been but half a man he might have helped us!"

"Never mind the stranger; he has work of his own, no doubt, and he spoke kindly to us, and brought us the message we have been looking for. Go—and go at once."

There was so much firmness in her tones that the boy did not hesitate longer. He threw his arms around his sister, kissed her silently, and then went away with a stealthy step and his weapon ready.

Coming from the cabin, the darkness was doubly intense, and though he followed the path well enough, it was because he knew it so thoroughly, not because he was able to see so clearly whither he was going.

When he had gone perhaps a dozen yards, some one rose up behind him, and slipped a pair of iron arms around him; he was lifted from the ground, and carried away—a prisoner.

CHAPTER X.

BLACK MOLL'S LITTLE SOCIABLE.

BILLY BARKER had seen the cabin where "Black Moll" lived more than once, and had

no trouble about finding it; but once in sight of the building he moved cautiously, his arm resting warningly on the brawny biceps of Pius Pete, as that worthy grumbled:

"I hain't seen nothin' 'v ther man on deck, an' he can't hev got in ahead of us. I tell yer, I believe he war throwin' sand, an' he's jist scooted off in sum other d'reeshun. Ther house are darker ner a jail, an' lonesomer then a graveyard."

"That's jist it, Petey. Ef it wa'n't fer that I'd feel kind ov streaked myself. But when they hang out the lanterns, and have a face in every winder is the time when there's nothin' goin' on. You bet, things inside ain't as quiet as they seem."

"All right; then we'll look inside. But I'd hate like thunder ter be shot by a woman. An' Black Moll knows the tools all by name, she does."

"She won't need to touch you up with them though. All I want is to have some one around to give a whistle if any one comes. I'll do the scoutin', an' take the risk."

"Good ernuf, ole man. Ef that's ther way yer divides it off I'm stickin' to yer tight ez wax. I ain't skeered ov nothin' on two legs, er four; but I do hate ter walk inter a box, 'thout a reasonerble 'lowance fur wild shootin' an' bigness ov mark. I kin git thar, but I don't yearn fur it."

Pete walked along with decidedly more spring in his steps. Perhaps he had forgotten that this was the arrangement from the outset; and maybe he had been afraid that it would play out about the time the expedition came down to solid business. At any rate, when they came to a spot where he could get a fair view of the place and its surroundings, he halted.

"Thar's yer game, all set an' waitin'. I'll back-set yer from this hyer p'int, an' you kin jist sail in. If you see anything wu'th ther risk I count on yer openin' up by an' by; an' ef I see ary thing ez I think you'd like ter know, I'll keep yer posted. Farewell."

He seated himself on a convenient boulder, refreshed himself with a chew of tobacco, and seemed to consider the present conversation closed.

Billy Barker had said all that he had wanted to, and without any further cautions or instructions approached the house.

It was not very hard to do it, even in daytime, with a reasonable hope of not being seen. At night, unless there was some one on a regular watch, it was no trick at all. It looked like caution thrown away when he took nearly ten minutes to reach the station under a little window, through which it once seemed to him that he detected a faint gleam of light.

He had scarcely taken his position there when the murmur of a low conversation reached his ears.

"I've found where the oil is," he muttered to himself, "but blessed if I'll strike it very heavy if I don't get a better spot to raise my derrick. We'll take a squint at it from this hill, and if it don't turn out to be a spouter I'll have to climb along to another."

First he looked warily around him, and then carefully raised up until his eyes were just above the level of the sill.

To his delight he could command a limited view of the room.

For the first time in his life he saw Jane Hetherington, as On Deck Harry had called her. He recognized her at once through a description that he had incidentally heard, though now he looked at her with a good deal more interest than he had ever expected to feel.

She was standing in one corner of the room by the side of a little table, on which was the lamp that illuminated the bare, desolate looking apartment, one hand, brown and wrinkled, resting upon the table, the other raised in gesture.

She seemed to be a little, stooped old woman, with a dark face, black eyes, hair black save as it was sprinkled with gray, and dressed from head to foot in sable garments. No wonder that Git Thar called her "Black Moll," or that she had the reputation of being something of a witch.

For some little time Billy Barker could not see to whom she was talking, but it was evident that she was in very serious earnest, and the watcher was confident that it was On Deck Harry.

What was his surprise to see a total stranger dart suddenly into his range of vision. His face was a frowning one, and his hands were outstretched, as though reaching for Jane Hetherington's throat.

But he halted at the instant that he appeared. Black Moll was as quick as he was; both hands were up and out, and each held a derringer that exactly covered his heart.

Her voice, too, raised, so that her words began to come quite distinctly to Barker's ears.

"Not this evening, if you please. Some other evening, perhaps. Ha, ha! I scarcely invited the genteel road-agent into my confidences without arranging to take care of my throat. I think you are better than your reputation; if you turn out worse I'll not be badly deceived."

"What did you have me meet you here for?"

If you think you can paddle your own canoe why try to bring me into the mix?"

Aided by the movements of the lips, that, since he had stepped into the glance of the light, were plainly to be seen, Barker had no difficulty in making out those words, even while he was intently studying the face of the man before him.

As he saw that the woman had checked the rush, he lowered the revolver he had brought up with the swiftness of one who shoots quick and sure, though he still held it convenient for use.

"He's a handsome man, from the word go," was his mental comment, "and she has nerve for a dozen. If I can hear this through to the end I'll learn something; but I don't understand this woman. Pity I didn't get an eye on her sooner. It would be a little queer if I'd been off the track all along, and just gettin' onto it now."

Then the woman recalled his attention.

"What did I bring you here fur? Well, can't you guess? I'm a woman, fighting for my rights, as I believe. I've spent some money; I have some very good men, that are willing to fight as well as work; but I need help—or may need it. If some day I disappear it will be because Starbiddle has made his swoop. And he'll carry a quarter of a million or more when he does it. He won't strike till he knows I have made my find. You might back me now; you might look after me then. Either way it will put money in your purse."

The man uttered a short, harsh laugh.

"Do you know who you are talking to? Can't you find some one better than Major Sunshine to be your watch-dog? You wouldn't trust me, and if you did—hey, presto! The big strike would go into the outlaw's pocket."

"That is jist it," said the woman slowly. "I know that you have your eyes on Starbiddle—that must mean on me, also. If you met me in the way of business it would be as you say. Between you two I am in danger and I prefer to shake hands with you on a square deal and a known percentage, rather than run the risk of Starbiddle taking all and my life along with it."

"You don't have a very high opinion of the colonel."

"Of him! Why, man alive! he was a worse outlaw than you. He spared neither friend nor foe. He is wicked from the ground up, and when he has the chance he won't be honest even if there is a million in it. He can't be honest. Once found out and the wheels of the law would be over him, to crush him. It is only a matter of weeks when he will be tracked hither and have to fly."

"Pity you can't hurry it up a little. I don't see yet very clearly—"

"You do; why deny it? You know who held the Spread Eagle once; and that when he was all but murdered, and forced to fly, that he left thousands and thousands behind him. You were his partner then; I want you to be mine now."

The man gave a start.

"A moment ago you accused me of having murdered Reginald Carden; now you ask me to be your friend because I was his. What do you mean? How have you heard anything about the past? How do you expect me to believe any such nonsense if I was really on the inside in regard to the Spread Eagle? It was a barren claim almost from the start. The lead dropped right from under his fingers. It never paid for the labor he put into it. More than that. I had no share in the Spread Eagle. If all the rest is true that you have been telling, that much is false."

"Did I not say that you were honest as times go? You don't even claim a share in what I profess to be able to find."

"Not unless I earn it. We are alone, there can be no danger in admitting here what I might not elsewhere. I was, at one time, Colonel Carden's partner—but not in the claim you are working. I was away when they came down on him or the poor fellow would have had at least a chance. I came back, I saved him, as I thought, and then he vanished. The drift that he had put a little fortune in caved in, and no one cared to claim the spot till you got under its fascination. If you are wise you will pull out before you end like Carden did."

"Ha, ha! You can't understand? Well, then, you are no true prospector or you could scent the gold at the other end of the drift. But I say again that I have not mistaken you. You would right your old partner now, as you would have done then. What better could I ask? Colonel Carden lives, his child lives, his partners live, his foes live; then why not you and I see justice done all around?"

"His daughter?"

Of all the points mentioned that was the one he repeated.

"Yes, his daughter. She has kept her counsel, but she is here to find him. Starbiddle knows her whole story. He has in his pay the two old servants who know the history of her family. They are watching over her now; but what will be the end? What does the hawk watch the dove for? Unless her father comes soon—and dare he come at all—it will be too late."

"Woman, you do not know what you are saying. If I could be sure of that I would almost believe the rest, and thank you to boot."

"If you had kept an eye on Git Thar you would have known—or at least suspected. Hardly could there be another blind girl that would come here searching for her father."

"Ah, I thought it was but chance! I might have known better. I have sent more than one messenger here to find out what had been going on during all these years; but they never came back. Now I have come myself."

"Make no mistakes. If they never came back there was a reason for it. They were either bought or killed. Who would do either, and why?"

"Can it be that Carden is here now?"

It was more in thought than in anger or fear that he asked the question.

"Why?"

"Because, if he recognized them every one of these men were the ones that he would drop on sight."

"Is there any one else that might believe it to be his interest to do the same? Any one that you have tried to hunt down—or that Carden would?"

"Heavens, yes! If he lives. But he cannot be living. I have sought him too long—even among the outlaws that I now rule with a rod of iron."

"His name?"

"Why mention it? If you know all the rest, that too is within your knowledge."

"John Hungerford, then?"

"Or Gene?"

She laughed bitterly.

"Ha, ha, you think you can mystify me! I tell you, if my strength was equal to my knowledge I would play this game out alone, and laugh at you in the end as a doubter that deserved to lose. Cannot you yet see what I want of you? All that I have told you is true; but there is more."

"I am waiting to hear it."

"I want you to bring me face to face with this Colonel Carden, if he still lives. I want you to help me protect his daughter. I swear to you that I will protect their interests as well as my own; but they must also help me. I would not know him; you will. A word or two and the enigma of years will be unraveled. I will unearth the *cache* that so nearly cost him his life; you aid me, protect me, watch Starbiddle that he does not spirit her away—"

"Kill him, you mean. If I had thought there was danger to her—but, come! Show me that Carden's child is here; and you and I shall do all the rest."

"I cannot prove my words with regard to her, but you can. She and her brother—"

"Her brother?"

"Yes, younger, a mere child. They are living in a little cabin at the other end of Git Thar. See her and judge for yourself. Her father may be dead; but she believes that he lives, that he will meet her here soon. Nay, more, she had a letter to that effect. Doubtless she has destroyed it—she is cautious. If not it may be found."

"Enough. I will see her. If this is the truth I will do all you ask, and more. Me and mine are at your service even in the insane idea of cleaning out the Spread Eagle Drift."

"It is not more insane than the rest since that is part of the story that stands or falls with it."

"Your evidence?"

"This."

She seemed to have no further fear of treachery since without hesitation she drew from her bosom a letter and placed it in his hands.

"You recognize the writing, perhaps. If so, read."

There was silence for a few moments, the woman watching him keenly while his eyes ran over the letter.

"Heavens! And I never suspected this. Either his brain had been crazed by his sufferings and he was mad when he wrote this, or you have unearthed what no man ever suspected."

"No man but one."

"He has learned it from you in some way that you do not recognize—but it shall do him no good. I will see the girl. If you have told me the truth, that far I am with you hand and soul."

Billy Barker had been watching all that was to be seen, and hearing all that could reach his ears.

He understood that the conference was about to break up and that it was time to look out for himself. If the man came suddenly upon him lurking there, there might be trouble that he was not ready for. He crept cautiously away toward the spot where he had left Pius Pete, and perhaps it was something of a relief when he found that worthy had disappeared.

"Who say that luck don't beat the deck?" he muttered. "Here are new wrinkles by the dozen—and Billy Barker is the man to take them all in."

CHAPTER XI.

A REMARKABLE STATEMENT.

"KENO!" chuckled the man who had captured Pet.

"Thar's yer leetle ho'net thet kerries ther sting; it ortn't ter be ary great shake ter finish ther job with him outen ther way."

"Han'le him keerfully, then. I don't want ter hu't ther leetle reptile. Jest lay him 'longside er Butternut tell I kin hev my talk out with ther other. It ain't 'zactly 'cordin' ter Hoyle; but I don't want him 'round nohow. Why! Say! Dog-gone yer—he's dead."

"Not much, Duffey. Don't yer think I know how hard ter squeeze? I jest shet off ther wind while I went through his pockets—"

"Fo'k over! Sheers, yer know, afore we go any furdur."

"Jest 'bout 'nuf fur two drinks. Hope may die ef thar's more ner these; an' them mighty small 'uns."

"All right," answered the other, examining the coins his partner held up. "Thar's nothin' like dervidin' ther profits ez yer go erlong."

"That's all right, but you're a-takin' ther hull ov 'em. Shell I submit ter those? Not ary."

"Don't howl afore yer hurt. I jest let yer inter this game 'cause you war an ole-time pard. Could 'a' done it all myself; but I thort when rocks war a-goin' William Henry Harrison ought ter hev a sheer, 'specially ef it got ter be ez big er thing ez I'm hafe countin' on. I'll even up when we git back ter camp—unless you've rocked this youngster ter sleep fur good, in w'ich case your thrapple and mine be ez good ez stretched already."

"I tell yer he's jest 'sleep fur long ernuf not ter know who got him. That's my way o' doin' biz. Never do more ner yer' paid fur, it may sp'ile 'nuther job. Now ef you don't want ter stand hyar tell some Git Thar tough comes 'long an' blows us both cold, you'll git down ter biz. I ain't takin' too much stock in it nohow."

"I ain't, neither, but what ner thunder d'yer want. Must yer hev ther hull airth at ther go off? Didn't I set 'em up like a man? Ain't I settin' 'em up several times? That's so much ahead. By-'m-by we'll see how ther keyards are goin' ter run. Ef the'r our way we'll hole on. Thar may be a millyun in it. Ef they don't come our way, jump ther game an' lay low. That's my platform, every time."

"Git right onter it, then. Ther kid are beginnin' ter wiggle, an' I want ter git outer this afore he kin drop ter my melojus voice. There's a wipe in his mouth, bridle-ways, an' he won't whis'le tell some 'un turns him loose."

The two moved away together toward the cabin, utterly unconscious of the fact that during their conversation a man had been watching and listening. When they were fairly out of hearing, this man glided forward.

It was on On Deck Harry.

He bent over Pet, and hastily threw off the cords that confined hands and feet, and the gag that effectually silenced him, though he placed his hands over the lips of the lad while he warningly whispered:

"Be quiet, Pet, I want to see what this all amounts to. I have had the scoundrels covered all along. If I had known how much danger you were in, I am afraid there would have been two less dead-beats in the world. I don't believe they're on this lay of themselves, however, and perhaps I can pick up a pointer that will save you and your sister trouble in the future. You're none too safe out here."

The boy heard, but scarcely understood. He sat up, mechanically rubbed his throat, and stared around in a bewildered sort of way.

"You'll be all right in a moment. Can you keep cool and quiet for a little? I swear no harm shall come to your sister. I will go and look after her. I want to know what game those toughs are trying to play, and they won't uncover if they know an outsider is about. Will you stay here a few moments till I come back for you? There is your ducky with the shotgun. Put in the time on him. Promise?"

"Anything so you help Sy. I cannot, I am too small."

The child had lost courage now, and was ready to cry. Harper pressed his hand and stole away.

Before he had gone very far he heard the murmur of voices; then Duffey's words plainly:

"Now hold yer gawp. Ef she can't see, I ain't bin advised ov any defeck in her hearin'-apperatus, an' thar's no tellin' what might happen ef she got ther bulge on us long ernuf ter raise a right good howl. Wot conversin' we do with her I wants ther doors an' winders all closed, an' you standin' outside with yer six-shooter ready ter cover any durned one-hoss cuss ez comes this way. Ef we don't make ther rifle, then I are jest a howlin' b'ar!"

"Dry up, Duffey; ain't I yer pard? An' when William Henry Harrison holds out ther hand ov fellowship once, he's all thar ter stay. Jest sail ahead with yer dog-fittin', an' I'll be hyar, outside, an' a watchin'. Ef yer wants any help, sound yer bazoo, an' I'll come in. You kin hev me jest ez you want, an' that's ther gospil truth. I'm a solid pard from 'way back."

Two more disreputable-looking old toughs it would have been hard to scare up in the Git Thar district; and they certainly were not there for any good. The one that answered to the name of Duffey was a little the hankier-looking of the two, and was the leading spirit, though

they looked like a pair of hang-dog sneaks, that would do anything that did not require courage. Even the whisky they had been surrounding could not give them thot.

William Henry Harrison extended his hand, and Duffey grasped it with enthusiasm. A sweet-looking couple they were, as they stood there on the narrow path, with hands clasped.

"That's so, Billy, that's so. I can't ask fur no better pard than you've bin, an' I'm a-trustin' ov you with ther last drop ov me blood. I'm goin' inter ther lion's den. Ef I leave my bones thar jest put up a two-story slab, an' say on it, 'He war a square pard, an' he died game.'"

"Psho, Duffey, don't pile it on too thick, yer might make me sick. It's nothin' but a skrimp of a gal, ez you could han'le with one finger. Ef it were a man now, with a shooter in each hand, yer might talk. Jest pitch in, an' git ther work done."

"I know, Billy, I know; but look what's behind 'em. It's you an' me ag'in' ther town. But hyar goes. Keep yer eyes open, an' don't furgit yer solid pard."

The two rascals shook hands gravely, and William Henry Harrison squatted down in the path to watch, while Duffey slouched up to the cabin, and without knocking or delay sidled through the door, which had been left unfastened.

"Good-evenin', leetle gal," he muttered, in a husky whisper, peering around to see if by any unlucky chance any one else might be present. "Thar's no use ter git flabbergasted, ez thar ain't no harm 'tended unless you don't do ther squar' thing. Then, I ain't sayin' what moutn't happen. Jest keep cool an' lissen ter what I've got ter say."

Syringia stood facing him.

The sudden appearance of the stranger had startled her; but she had not lost her wits. With her head a little bent forward, while listening she was striving to make out by the tones of his voice what sort of a man her visitor might be. To his introduction she made no answer, and the reprobate went on.

"That's right. I'd hate ter hev yer do yerself an injoory, ez yer would ef you sot up a screetch. In course I can't afford ter be found hyar; so ef it should look dangerous, I'd hev ter shut ther wind off. That leetle neck ov yours would snap like nothin' ef them big paws ov mine took hold on it. Are yer listenin'; an' are yer goin' ter act reasn'ble?"

"Who are you, sir, and what do you want here? We have nothing of which it would be worth your while to rob us; and I warn you that we are not as unprotected as we seem. If your intentions are evil, they will be defeated; and perhaps with harm to yourself. Now, say your say, and then leave me."

"Fur a leetle mite ov a blind gal, all erlone with a ruffian like me, yer does crow mighty loud; but then, not seein', an' not knowin' jest who I be—thar's some 'scuse fur you. When we talk a leetle bizzness, you'll understand ther out-it ov me an' my pards—which last I hev left outside fur fear ov 'larnin' you too much on ther outstart. Ther facts are this."

He stopped and looked as keenly as he could through his bleared eyes, to catch any sign that she anticipated what he was about to say, but she stood there just as coolly uninterested as it was possible to conceive of her being. The sight hardly reassured him, but he went on:

"It's skassly wuth while ter call yer 'tention to ther fact that you've bin a-pullin' wool over ther eyes ov Git Thar. You an' me knows ther boy ain't no kith ner kin to yer, an' that you jist picked him up at Poker Bar. Well, hearin' ov a blind gal ez war playin' round through ther camps, the idea struck me thar war suthin' quibsy onder ther outside; an' when I knowed this, I war sure ov it, an' jist scratched all ther harder tell I got down to ther truth over ther matter. You bin a-passin' ov yerself off ez Jim Carden's darter so long, that yer begins ter b'leve it yerself, but, ding blast my ole hide, ef yer ain't ther darter ov ole Tom Duffey—which is me! Come ter me arms, me long-lost darter! It's trooly a interestin' family reunion, an' if I didn't see oceans of money in it, I'd weep fur sure."

"What do you mean, sir, by this nonsense? I do not know you—I never met you before. I am Colonel Carden's daughter, and you know it, I guess, as well as I do."

"Hole right on, an' stick a pin thar. That's truth by ther bucketful, an' no mistake. I know it jest ez well ez you do, but not a dog-goned whiffet more. You're a-passin' ez sich, an' it's a neat leetle game, ez I don't want ter interfere with, not now, by no means. All I want is ter show yer that I'm in on ther ground floor, an' then I'll perceed ter arrange fur bizzness. But thar's no use fur playin' off atwixt you an' me. Yer don't mean ter say that yer don't recognize ole Tom Duffey?"

"I do not know you, and I cannot understand your meaning. Surely you cannot be wild enough to think that I could be deceived by any such rank folly as this. If you are wise you will go at once; there is nothing to be made by your here."

"I ain't so sure ov that. It kinder strikes me that when thar's a play fur a millyun, an'

a feller hez a chance ter hold a hand an' chip in 'thout it's costin' him a cent, he'd be a fool ef he warn't all thar. Ef you an' me jest hitch hosses ther chances are good ter pull off the hull boodle."

"There is no game that I know of—if there was, what madness could make you believe that I would be willing to join my fortunes with yours?"

"Kin I b'lieve what I hear, er are yer on'y a tryin' ov me? Yer stick to it that yer don't remember Sawnose Bar an' ther leetle cabin whar yer mammy tried ter bring yer up in ther way yer sh'd go? Oh, me poor heart. Yer' a-trompin' ov it all down in ther mire! An' yer can't see ole Tom Duffey, a-reelin' home from Mulligan's s'loon; an' you a-cryin' fit ter kill fur fear he'd whale the life outen ther hull family? Oh, my, I couldn't 'a' b'lieved it; an' you ther best leetle gal ez ever wore shoe-leather!"

At last the girl was interested. The vagabond had struck the chords he had been reaching for.

"Strange," she said, gliding nearer and nearer to him, a troubled, uncertain, wistful look in her eyes.

"Can it be possible that you speak truly? Such a cabin and such a life I do faintly remember, but I thought I had seen it only in my dreams. Father laughed when I told him what he called my 'foolish fancies.' Old man, how do you know anything about them?"

"That question are ther hub of ther hull myst'ry. How sh'd I ef I hadn't bin thar? An' that was afore ther curt'in war drawn over them peepers ov yours. Poor leetle gal! I 'member when they see'd ez fur ez any critter on this hyar footstool. But then come that fever, an' arter that, why, things got dimmer an' dinner ontill yer couldn't see at all. Then I got in trouble with the Vigilantes, an' hed ter skin out; an' yer mother, she were blamed fool ernuf ter go wanderin' round, a-draggin' you with her, ontill you'd lost yer bearin's and she hed got one foot over ther divide. Then, that cussed Kunnel Carden turned up, an' p'isoned her mind and yours, an' they made you atween 'em furgit yer poor ole daddy. That's ther hull story, tho' I kin git furdur down inter ther details ef you still ain't a-b'lievin'. Now, I've got ther idear fur ter git even, an' make a heap good thing fur you an' me. Trust yer daddy an' he'll pull yer through. An' we won't stay hyar long, neither. My heart's jest bin a-breakin' over me poor leetle blind gal, an' when we kerrel ther shekels I'll take her ter whar ther doctors are, ez onderstands sich things. They'll hev her right in a jiffe, an' her eyes 'li be ez bright onc't more, an' she kin see ez fur ez ther next one. Eh, Cleopatra, my darlin'?"

"More and more this remarkable story affected the girl. She no longer denied its truth, as she was inclined to do at the outset; she had somehow got into the regions of doubt.

"Strange," she softly answered. "My senses all tell me not to believe, and yet, as you speak, the old-time life comes back to me clearer than it has been for years. I dare not say it is the truth; I cannot say that it is false. Oh, I wish that Pet was here. Something has happened to him, I fear. Have you put him out of the way?"

"What'd I be doin' that fur? He's no kit nor chit ov mine, an' ef yer wants ter set him up fer a leetle angel on wheels, Duffey's willin', pervided he don't come atwixt us an' our plans. Come ter me arms me long-lost jewel, an' I'll expound ther lay-out."

"Wait!"

She spoke sharply, holding up her hand between them, the palm opened toward him.

"It is hard to understand; but it is harder still to believe. Give me until to-morrow to think it all over."

"Take a week ter think ov it; but keep a close mouth about what you've hearn— Ah!"

For such a besotted-looking ruffian he was remarkably quick on the draw; but chain lightning could have helped him but little then. Just as a sharp whistle sounded from without and almost at the door, another man sprung into the room.

"Hyar, you, what's ther matter with you? Hands up or travel the divide. I'm talking!"

"Bloody murder!" exclaimed Duffey, staggering back.

"It's Major Sunshine, his own blessed self."

CHAPTER XII.

NOW YOU SEE HIM; AND NOW YOU DON'T.

"AND what are you doing here? I caught a glimpse of that partner of yours lurking about and I knew that it meant no good. I am just in time to prevent villainy of some kind. About face, Tom Duffey, and march. If it wasn't for mussing up the floor, I'd blow you cold right where you stand. You know me, and you know when I talk, it's gospel truth, and that it's not often I hold my hand when I begin to think about pulling trigger."

"That's so, an' I'm 'preciatin' ov ther mus-y, showed ter yours trooly. An' William Henry Harrison—be he included in ther same lovin'—"

kindness, er will I find him outside 'ith his throat cut from year ter year? 'Cause why, ef it's that last, thar ain't no use ter bother huntin' fur him. I will say, when Kunnel Sunshine begins a job, thar ain't no sich man livin' fur slaughterin' ther entire hog. Honest Injun, we ain't bin doin' nothin'. You kin ask ther gal ef I hev. On'y jest stopped ter ax fer a crust ov bread fur a pore ole cripple. A feller must live."

"You took a mighty risky plan for doing it. I don't object to saying it to you. You know me of old. I've got my eye on this ranch, and if any harm comes to it I'll know where to look for the cause. When I look for a man I always find him, and when I find you I'll kill you on sight. Now you can pass out. Your pard is slinking in the bushes, and I'll give you just five minutes' grace. After that—the boys have their instructions and are on the watch. If they find you within a mile of this shanty, they'll shoot you sure. I want a little confidential discourse with this young lady myself. It seems to me that you are mighty fresh to-night."

"Thankee, cap'n, thankee! I'm a-goin'. But you kin take a leetle good advice, too. These leetle folks are my frien's, an' you jest keep a sharp lookout thet you don't harm 'em. Ef yer does, I know who's hyer last. You don't want ter hev Git Thar chasin' you. Thar ain't no nonsense 'bout them. When they draw they file. Day-day."

He swaggered away in a style that gave no hint of the fear he felt, and Walter Gruel looked after him curiously. The exhibition of nerve, such as it was, had not been expected.

Looking neither to the right nor left, Duffey did not see Black Moll crouching almost within touching distance. He would not have seen William Henry Harrison if he had not first run fairly against him.

"Don't yer say a word, pard, don't yer say a word," he mumbled, as he recognized him.

"Things are a-workin' jest right. I'm ter see ther gal ter-morrer, an' you kin bet ther job'll begin frum about that time. Yer orter seen me brace up an' talk Dutch to him. He'll sail in now an' fix ther hull thing fur us. They can't both sides shake us, Billy; an' ef they does, er don't come down heavy, we'll hev ther gal an' go it alone fur rocks—fur rocks, pard, a hull wagon-load on 'em."

"Mebbe; but I've bin mighty oncomfortable 'bout it. Fu'st thing yer knows yer won't know nothin', if yer gambols 'round Sunshine. Yer couldn't 'a' found some 'un easy ter buck ag'in in ther start—yer hed ter pick him. Why, blame it! he hed us foul once afore, when we war jest a-roastin' a Chinerman, an' he's jest eebchin' ter throw us cold."

"He let up, didn't he? An' ter-night I jest worked it fine on him, pard. Kim along, an' I'll tell yer ther hull story."

And chuckling, as over a very funny piece of business, Duffey marched off with his pard, leaving Major Sunshine to finish his conversation with Syringia.

"I don't think the old reprobate is going to come around here troubling you soon again since he knows I have him spotted, and to make it sure I'll see that the boys at Git Thar get on to him. When he understands that if any harm comes to you he will be held responsible he will go slow. The drunken old scoundrel wouldn't have sand enough to tackle anybody but a blind girl or a cripple orphan. And now, my child, since one good turn deserves another, I want you to tell me where I can find Colonel Carden. By just the merest bit of good luck I learned that his children lived here, and that you had but lately heard from him."

Major Sunshine had a pleasant voice and he knew how to use it. To hear him speak no one would have ever supposed how much there was of life and death behind his gentleness.

Syringia did not suspect him, that much was certain; and yet he might as well have expected information from the stones along the road.

"Oh, sir, I do not know who you are, but whoever you may be I thank you for your kindness, and I wish I could make some return. Indeed I no not understand your question, and could not answer it if I did. My poor brother! Can you not add to my indebtedness by aiding me to look for him? He went out some time ago, and something must have happened to him. If he had been here the villain would not have dared to show himself. Oh, will you go and look for him?"

"Scarcely, my dear, since I know that he is safe, in good hands, and I have no need for him at all. You have the colonel's letter, and I must see it."

His voice was just as silky as ever, yet somehow there was, on second thoughts, a great deal of determination in it.

"Your words sound very strangely. Indeed I do not understand."

"No, my child, I know you do not. If you would trust in me you might see more clearly. You may be Syringia Carden—I am not sure yet, but I am 'most sure—I cannot believe—that Reginald Carden—Jim Carden as they called him here—is living. His letter will be the proof. I know his handwriting beyond any disguise.

Let me have it—I must have it. It is hidden in your bosom now."

As if to confirm the charge Syringia clapped her hand to her breast when he mentioned the hiding-place of the letter.

Sunshine laughed shortly.

"See, you have given yourself away already."

Then, in a lower tone:

"You do not understand how important this is to you—to me. From others you would be wise to conceal this, for the time at least; but not from me."

"Indeed, I have no such letter. Had I received one it would have been burned long ago."

"Ah, that would be wisdom; yet I have my doubts. Will you not trust me, girl?"

"I cannot."

"Then I must—"

He moved toward her his hands outstretched.

"Play fair, my friend. Look the girl in the face; read her story there if you can, but beware how you uncover your hand here until you are certain of the game."

Jane Hetherington stepped through the doorway and placed herself in front of Syringia.

She again menaced him with her derringers, but this time the effect was hardly the same. He paused; but only as if to give her time to think.

"Out of the way woman," he said, with a sneer.

"Do you think that I care for your pop-guns? I've risked them when they were held by men, and this matter is life and death. I must know the truth if it takes me over the range. Girl—"

"There's a man holding them now. Hands up, Major Sunshine! I said I'd get even; and I'm taking you right into camp now."

On Deck Harry burst through the doorway, coming with the drop. He had been watching these interviews from without and it seemed to him that the time to interfere had come now.

He was the smaller man, but holding the advantage he had no doubts. A twist of the finger and Sunshine must drop, and the corpse would be all paid for. When both knew this the matter was settled for the present.

"Up they are," said Sunshine coldly; "but listen to reason."

"We'll walk down to the Pay Dirt first, and then I'm ready for reason in great chunks. If there's five thousand dollars in it well and good. Eli can arrange that. And if there ain't I'll have thirteen hundred dollars' worth of satisfaction, and you'll know a man next time you see him."

"You're wide off, young man, if you think—"

Then there was a change of deal, with a startling suddenness.

Harper had felt sure of his man because he was sure he had him alone, and he knew he had him covered. In an instant he found that women were not to be relied on, and that sometimes counted for a great deal. Jane Hetherington deliberately stepped in the range of his aim, while the arms of Syringia closed around his neck in a nervous clasp.

It was only for a moment, but for that time Sunshine had him at his mercy. Had he chosen, there would have been an end to Harry Harper then and there.

Instead he gave a quick bound and vanished, before On Deck Harry had time to express his surprise.

"Take care of her!" he shouted, throwing the girl into the arms of Black Moll; and he darted out in pursuit.

He might have spared himself the trouble. The night was around him, shutting out all signs of the fugitive.

"Confound him! he'll make me take him yet. If I do settle down to the trail he'll find me a bad man from 'way back."

Syringia dropped back into Jane Hetherington's arms.

The woman uttered some soothing words in her ear but she scarcely heard them. Shut out from sight, her successive adventures had dumfounded her.

"Have courage, little one. Here is your brother. He will comfort you and we will protect."

In a dream she listened to her receding footsteps, and the first words of Pet, who was bending over her in some dismay.

"Here I am Sy. What has happened? Did they try to harm you? They will not find me so foolish again. He came and saved me, and has been with me watching. He said they should not hurt you, and he wanted to see."

"Oh, Pet, why were you not here? I wanted you so much, to see for me. How will it all end? I do not understand."

"Don't put such a wail in your voice, Sy. Some day you will see again as well as any of us; but if you would only tell us all I could help you better, much better, now."

"Hush! I dare not tell you more. Just think it all as I told you—that you know nothing more at all. Then, if I am ever sure—quite sure—I will tell you the rest."

"Very well, Sy. You are all that I have. What you tell me I will believe, just as you say it. I won't forsake you, and no one shall hurt you. I don't think any one would want to.

And they are all so good to us. I am not afraid. And by and by father will come, and then it will be all right."

"Don't be too sure of that, little ones. You are figuring up a heap big lot that ain't worth a cent in the retail market."

It was once more the voice of On Deck Harry, who stood in the doorway.

"I've been keeping an eye on your visitors, but I can't do it all the time. If I should see the colonel I'll tell him, though, that there's enough in the mix here to give you a chance. Good-by, little ones, and look out for breakers."

They would have stopped him, but he went at once, at first moving directly along the path toward Git Thar, but after a little, turning aside and striking into the left hand trail at the Forks, that led away from the town. He walked with his head held down, his eyes fixed on the road.

Meantime eyes were on him. A man who had been stealthily approaching the cabin halted suddenly, and crouched behind a boulder. He was well hidden, and was not surprised to see Harry go on without a sign of being aware of his presence.

For a stranger around Git Thar, On Deck Harry showed great familiarity with its trails. He went straight on, without hesitation or sign of fear, while all the time the other man followed in his wake.

A mile from the Forks, just where the road was the roughest, Harry turned to the left and plunged into a covert of bushes.

The tracker once more halted, sinking promptly to the ground, where, at the distance of but a few feet, in the darkness he was almost invisible.

"He may be steerin' fur old man Peters' lay-out; but he may jest ez likely be dodgin' in thar ter see ef thar's some 'un on his trail. Guess I'd better go slow a bit. He ain't no fool, an' it's jest likely he's on ther lookout fer breakers. Blame it! Are that ther kunnel? Ef I couldn't do better ner that I'd go soak myself. You kin hear him a mile."

Somebody else was coming from the direction of the town, and though not exactly making noise enough to be heard a mile, was advancing with a good deal less caution than the position seemed to demand, if he wanted to escape detection. He did not see the dark figure lying by the roadside; but just as he got opposite to it he heard a sharp hiss, and halted, cocking a pistol as he leaned toward the spot from whence the sound seemed to come.

"Hist! That you, Kunnel Star? Ef so, keep dark. Ther game's not fur ahead. An' ef it ain't, show yer 'and mighty quick, afore I begin ter shoot. I've got yer kivered."

"Hold hard, Pete. I'm here at last. Seemed as though I never could get away. I just was too late when you started out, and I've been stumbling along behind, ever since, afraid to close up fer fear I'd blunder into something. What is it?"

"Ef it's a squar' deal he's strikin' fur ther old shanty whar Peters used ter hang out. Ef he's settin' it up fur us you kin bet yer life he's heered us a'ready, an' it ain't much use ter 'spect nothin'. Jest squat yerself 'longside ov me an' I'll let yer know what else I think 'bout it. It's a blamed pity I didn't git onter him sooner."

Colonel Starbiddle—for he the new-comer was—crouched down by the side of Pius Pete, and in the fewest of words received his views. Then Pete crept cautiously from the trail.

He was gone but a few moments, and returned as silently as he went.

"It's all right. He's camped right down in ther shanty, an' he's got a pard. I ain't seen him yit; but thar's a show ter find out what they're up to. Ef they don't hev some confidential deescourse I jest want ter know. Foller me."

The two went silently, and, Pete leading the way with the confidence of one who knows the road, approached the shanty, which was some hundred yards distant from the spot where the man of piety had been overtaken by the colonel. It was a tumble-down shack of a little building, evidently not designed for defense, and standing at one side of a little opening. There was a light within, and two men conversing in an ordinary tone.

"Blame my eyes!" whispered Pete, as they crept near, "ef it ain't that galoot what calls hisself Travellin' Eli ez he bez fur a pard. We've struck pay dirt ther fu'st clatter."

CHAPTER XIII.

COLONEL STAR CATCHES ON.

THE two men had but just begun their conversation, and as they spoke carelessly, and without any apparent fear of eavesdroppers, nearly every word reached the listeners.

"I've been around the city, Eli, and I've just gathered in information by the cord; couldn't have hit it at a better time. They are a pretty tough gang in there, but you must just have snatched them bald-headed. They're ready to lay fer all strangers, you and me included. Didn't squirm much when I talked solid sense, but I've been dodging a dozen of 'em all over town ever since. The moment I said Jane Hetherington they wanted to know what I had to

say to her. Between those that wanted to hear, and those that wanted to shoot on general principles, if any of them had caught on I'd have had a tough time. I threw them all off, I reckon, but I'll bet the last chip in the stack that I wasn't very far ahead of the hearse."

"But did yer hear anything ov our man? That's what I want ter know."

"Go slow, my noble lord. Maybe I did; maybe I didn't. If I did, we're five thousand out; if I didn't, it makes no difference. I thought I was getting pretty close; if I hadn't sworn to bring him in alive, I'd have had a corpse to show, anyhow. It's six to one he was there to-night."

"In course he war thar. Didn't I have that down fine? An' ef I hadn't give myself away in ther jump-off I'd 'a' found out ther hull game. You're mighty good medecine with ther pistol, but yer ain't wuth three shucks ter find out anything. Whar did yer begin to look fur him?"

"At the Pay Dirt, where you did. When he strikes a camp, he wants room to spread according to his size; and that's headquarters."

"Had he been thar, though? It ain't what yer expects in this world, but what yer gits, that counts when ther tax c'lector kims 'round."

"If you think you can get the story any faster by asking questions go on with the catechism. That's a bully way to find out nothing you don't know," answered Harper, a little sulkily. "I should judge he had been there very much, but I didn't like to be too inquisitive. There was a corpse in the back room that might have been his handiwork. There was no one else to claim it. I didn't ask too many questions for fear of a side racket. I don't mind plain shooting; but doing it from the side of the fence gets me."

"Feel kinder in the wrong box. Don't you worry, pard. Thar's five thousand in it sure, an' I'm jest ther man ez are goin' in ter kerrel that whole gang. But, say, did yer see the corpses in the back room? In course it ain't likely, but it mout er bin, don't yer see, Sunshine himself."

On Deck Harry perpetrated a low whistle.

"Take my hat! I'm new in this biz and I swear I never thought of that. Guess not, though. If any one had taken in such a solid chief he would have been prancing around, claiming the glory."

"Unless they didn't know the bigness ov ther strike."

"Oh, you make me sick with your suggestions. Confound you, why didn't you go into the town like a man of business should, instead of howling about like a condemned lunatic? I was losing all that time; and what you were doing didn't amount to anything. See here, if you go to playing roots on me you'll find me a bad man for a joke, and there'll just be a quiet little funeral out here in the bushes, with a mourning cortege of one, that won't drown himself in tears. You hear me?"

There was a sharp ring in On Deck Harry's voice, his hands dropped to his waist, and he started to his feet. When the mask was off he could be as fierce as any of them.

Traveling Eli didn't seem the least concerned in the matter. He smiled grimly, and slowly emitted a mouthful of smoke before he answered:

"Don't worry yourself 'bout Eli—he'll git thar in due time ef yer give him a show; er ef yer don't it ain't makin' much difference. Ef ary soul war ter be sp'icious 'bout this hyar partnership it orter to be me; an' I can't get the hang ov it yet, jist how yer war brought nigh ernuff to ther rack ter decide ter come in. I tell yer ag'in I'll play yer fair; an' ef yer can't b'lieve me, pull out now. But I means ter hev my man—ef I hev ter drop On Deck Harry a gettin' ov him. Now, that's jest solid. What yer got ter say 'bout it?"

"Don't grow excited, Eli. If I don't get into a corner when it's fight or drop you can stake all your sequins that I'll stay with you."

"And you understand that it's not for any five thousand that's in it; and it's not to see him killed off, short and sharp. I could do that myself. But I want the infernal scoundrel to feel the rope. I want him to go back with a vision of it dangling before his eyes night and day, the noose slowly tightening, hope oozing away till he gets 'way down in the mud of misery. And if he could have a broken leg or a mashed arm, or something that would break his nerve all up, I'd like it the better. Then I want to stand on the platform with my watch in my hand and say: Walter, my son, you have about three minutes more in this vale of tears, and there's no chance fer back talk or snap shots. I have you foul and you've got to die. In less than half an hour I'll be hauling out your corpse, and the most profitable way of spending those three minutes is for you to be guessing what I am going to do with it. I'm On Deck Harry, and I've got you in hock, ha, ha!"

There was nothing genial left in his voice now, as he spoke; and his face was distorted almost beyond recognition, as he shook his fist at large, and hissed out his wishes.

"You do pitch it purty strong," said Eli, slowly.

"What in the name ov wonder hez he bin doin'?"

"Hush, don't ask me for the whole story. It's too long; and before I got through I might be too raving mad to be a safe pard to bunk with. I've been after him, just as he's been after me; and when you opened up, my heart just jumped for joy and I said, Eli, I'm your man."

"I thort it war kinder queer that yer hitched on to a stranger jest so sudden."

"Why, Eli, I saw you getting in your work, and knew how you were in earnest, and I'd go through fire and brimstone for a man that gave me my revenge."

"It war lucky that I lit yer when I did, though, ef yer hedn't bin shoal on ther bar I'd 'a' thort ther luck too good ter last. But yer might give a pard an idea what's ther matter with Sunshine. Thar may come a time when it'll be a heap big thing ter know jest what's betwixt you two."

"Don't fret yourself about what's between him and me; there was a woman in the case—of course. There always is when two men fall out, and go for each other for all that's in the material."

"Turned up short a wife, did yer? He's a mighty deceivin' cuss in that line."

"Worse," answered Harry, with a hard laugh.

"If he had run away with my wife maybe I could have stood it a leetle better. But he carried off the only woman I ever cared for—I swear, as pure, and good, and true, and noble a girl as ever drew the breath of life. If I had met him in six months, or even a year, I swear, I would have dropped him on sight. It makes me hot all over—red hot—to think of it, even now. But as a man gets older he ought to be steadied up a little; and he can see things that he never would have thought of. I'm not so wild to shoot him now; but the dream of my life is to see him hanged! And I'll do it, too. You carry your end and I'll keep mine up."

"You ain't mentioned any names yit. Mebbe ef you would, I could help you to a leetle pleasant racket than yer ever dreams ov."

"I'm not speaking names. We're after Walter Gruel, that's all I've got to tell you yet. Time enough when I have my man on a string and we're laying for the balance. Now, sinner, down on that and listen to reason."

His voice dropped into a lower tone, and the two men seemed to be talking over their plans with a great deal more caution than they had used in regard to their intentions, for not a word reached the listeners.

Pius Pete would have made an effort to overhear the rest of the conversation, but a touch on the shoulder restrained him.

"Come!" whispered the judge, and the latter led away his comrade from the spot.

"What do you think of all that? Can we allow such men as those to remain in Git Thar? I don't want them about if the final catastrophe is to come—and yet I'm not so sure but that it would be a good plan to help them along a little, and send them on their way rejoicing, just as soon as possible."

"But, see hyar. Ain't it playin' it a leetle low down ter lay in with these hyar 'tectiv's? Git Thar ain't that style, an' they'd hop up an' howl ef they knowed it—unless, mebbe, you've got a grudge ag'in' this Sunshine."

"Curse him, no! I've nothing in for him except that I want him out of the road, and with him the men that are after him. A detective that comes down here on such a trail is no slouch, and if he should happen to get a fresh scent he'd make it uncomfortable. You must know, if you've got sense enough to know anything, that it's an awfully risky game that's being played at Git Thar."

"That's truth yer' shoutin'; but ef we found this hyar Sunshine, an' give him ther straight tip it kinder strikes me he'd find a way ter fix things an' not bother us."

"And if he didn't they'd be worse than they are. Confound it, Pete, I'm trusting you as I'm not trusting a living soul in camp. You're not much fer head-work, but you have the nack of getting through with your work better than the most. That's luck. And we're in the swim together. That's my foolishness. I'm risking a heap of money, and maybe my life on your say-so—partly, of course, because it agrees with what I know. For the present you haven't much to do except to keep yourself out of mischief. I've backed your hand to a very liberal amount, on very liberal terms. Now, what I say goes. You do what I say, and I'll run the circus."

"Jest ez yer wants it, old man, Petey are easy ter please. I'd 'a' liked ter know what they war whisperin' 'bout, 'cause that war ther juice of it all, but I ain't keerin'. I'd better stuck ter Billy Barker. He'll be swearin' I throw'd off on him—ez I did, more ner less. But don't yer fergit ez he's a friend ov mine that I'm goin' ter see through ther rifle at Git Thar. 'Tain't offen I freezes enter a man fur a pard, but when I do I'm all thar."

"What infernal nuisance are you trying to get through you? He'll clean you out to your grub steak at draw and then laugh at you. Let him alone. Nobody wants to hurt him unless

we find that he has the pumps to working and is getting more information than the law allows. Then, maybe, some one will drop you both. You understand that, perhaps."

"I understand; but I ain't afeard. Yer needs me an' I'm safe ez a church. I ain't goin' ter leak, but the man ez plays me fur a clear fool are goin' ter git left. Don't make no mistake. When Billy Barker be missin' I'll be huntin' fur him. Jest be sure that I don't hev ter look in your d'rec'shun. Sabbe? Now, let's be gittin' back ter camp. I wants ter hear what Billy's got ter say fur hisself."

Starbiddle gave an angry start, but by an effort restrained himself. There were few men in camp that would have cared to talk quite so straightly to him. Pius Pete always did have the reputation of having more mouth than brains.

CHAPTER XIV.

DUFFEY'S MISSION.

THE Pay Dirt was open, but it had a doleful, dismal appearance in daylight. There were a few loungers who had a bleary, blouzy look, and their impecuniosity was plain without a second glance.

Among the loafers sat Tom Duffey and his pard, William Henry Harrison. That they were "dry" was undeniable, and that they were likely to remain so unless the good Samaritan put in a sudden appearance, seemed just as potent. Duffey's red blood-shot eyes winked and blinked, while William Henry's dry tongue wandered nervously along the edges of his blistered, tobacco-stained lips whenever some more fortunate man made his way to the bar.

"Ouch! Sammey, I've seen bad manners afore, but this takes ther cake. Thar ain't a soul in Git Thar, ez'll ask us. I want ter die an' be an angel, an' see whar Git Thar'll go to when it dies."

"It'll burn wuss than we do," replied Duffey, with a short, hard laugh. "An' so it orter. They's aaterally drinkin' alone. May ez well give it up. We kin lay back an' sleep all day, an' mebbe ter-night thar'll be some men 'round that hez more gin'rous souls."

"An' we jest layin' back tell we hev a good ready afore gittin' ter be bloody monopolists, ourselves. 'Pears kinder redickerlous like, thet we can't git a nip outen it now. Mebbe ef you war ter go down an' see yer daisy she might hev a leetle pity. Duffey, I'm just a dyin'."

"Die, then. You'd sell out ther hull plant fur one square drunk. It's a mighty good thing that I'm runnin' this hyar outfit; an' I'll keep on a-doin' ov it. Hold yer hush a minnit. I'll sw'ar, ef that don't look like my ole side pard. I'll strike him anyhow. Lay low."

Duffey's manner suddenly changed from one of deep depression to one of moderate hope, and he turned away from his partner with an unconsciousness that meant he had only been answering some casual question, and had nothing to do with him. He looked around with mild carelessness, his gaze passing, but not pausing at, a pair of laughing blue eyes.

But it came back to them, and then he gave a start.

"Kin I b'leve me eyes?" he muttered, in a thick but jubilant whisper.

The words could not be heard three yards away, while the man who had just entered stood more than half a dozen. They were only part of Duffey's realistic manner.

He started from his lounging attitude, advanced with outstretched hand, and yet halted an instant at every other step. There were spasms of doubt in the midst of his certainty.

"Ef it ain't my ole side pard then—well, I be hanged! Hank—it's you! Put her right thar! Put her right thar!"

Doubt fled away. His face beamed with honest enthusiasm, and his hand ceased to waver. Perhaps it was something of a shock when the palm of the young man came down upon his with a smack, and On Deck Harry laughingly greeted him.

"Right there she is, Tommy. I knew you as far as I could see you, and the sight broke me all up. How in the name of all the cripples, did you get away? I don't feel any grudge against you; but if I'd known the rope broke, I'd have been watching my cayouse a good deal closer last night. Just the same ole Tom Duffey, horse-thief and bum that I helped tie the rope to a year ago. And, hang me, if I didn't give five dollars to see you planted. You played it low down on the boys; but I don't hold any ill-will about it. What you doing here now? Same old story, eh? Looking out for a chance?"

The heartiness with which he was met ought to have been refreshing; but it was not entirely appreciated, if looks went for anything.

"I'm Duffey, sure ernuf—ole Tom Duffey, ez ther boys used ter call me—but ain't you gittin' things jest a leetle mixed? 'Pears like ez though—I ain't wantin' ter give ary offense—but wa'n't it you ez war elevated? Thar war some talk 'bout yer havin' bad luck after I left, but I never cotched on ter ther rights ov it. I kin listen now. Mebbe they didn't give yer fair play; an' mebbe it's all a thunderin' lie. I'd 'a' swore it war ef you hedn't menshuned it."

On Deck Harry laughed again.

"I see you haven't lost any of your cheek. The real fact of the case is you want a drink at my expense—and one for your pard if you can wring him in. All right. Trot him up. You're just the man I've been looking for. After you get two or three drinks ahead, maybe you'll be ready to talk; and I've got something to say that's worth the hearing."

"Ye'r my man. Say, you William Henry Harrison, waltz up! Hyar's the whitest man in Git Thar, an' he sez, free whisk."

William Henry needed no second invitation, and he took his stand in front of the bar, in too much haste to even think of the formality of offering his hand to his new acquaintance.

Rapid Johnny looked sharply at the responsible man of the trio, and then set down the decanter and glasses. There was no mistaking what On Deck Harry meant.

The two vagabonds had the bottle between them, and they touched it very liberally. In the course of the next five minutes they had tapped it thrice, and were proceeding to a fourth interview when Harry interfered.

"That's about enough for charity and old times. The rest will all have to be pure business. Set it back, Johnny, set it back. And you, you runsoaked old rascal, come over here and try to talk truth for once. If you don't hit the mark I wouldn't wonder if one of you would get hurt. William Henry, you can sit there."

"Thankee, I'm thar, all in a bunch. But don't be parshul. Ef you must go fur anybody, go fur both. 'Twouldn't be fair ter give one ov us a high seat in Kingdom Come, an' not t'other. What kin Tom Duffey do fur you?"

"Duffey, I want to have a little talk with you; and I mean business, chuck up."

"Generally yer do," responded Tom, with a shrug of his shoulders.

"You understand that was not all fun—what I said about horse-stealing, and the high rope act, and all that. I really thought you were dead."

"It was a monstrous close shave, though I dunno how you came ter hear 'bout it."

"Oh, I hear about everything. And you understand that when I take hold of anything, I do it in the biggest earnestness you ever saw. What I say then I always mean. Everything goes, and if I have to kill a man, it makes no difference."

On Deck Harry's face was smiling, his tone was airy; but Tom Duffey was looking into his eyes, and appreciated all the earnestness that the outside world could not see. He nodded, and licked his lips nervously. If looks went for anything, he would have been glad to run away.

"Yes, you have me down fine. That's right; that's what I want, because I don't want you to make any mistake. Just so sure as you don't play me fair, I intend to kill you. If I can't take you back to Red Earth and have you hung, I'll just cut your throat here and be done with it. Is that a square way to put it?"

Tom Duffey's face became, if anything, more ghastly, yet he did not attempt evasion, or plead ignorance.

"Ef you know ther rights ov that story, yer orter know that it's a mistake. It'd jest be murder ter hang me fur killin' that woman. I wouldn't 'a hurt a hair ov her head, an' she jest throwed herself in ther way."

"I can't help that, Duffey. Appearances were against you. I may believe all that; but all the same I know they would hang you if they caught you, and no one would blame me for killing you. That's the preamble. Now for business."

"It's orful dry, talkin' ov sich seryus things," whined Duffey, with an appealing look toward the bar.

"So much the better. You can enjoy yourself more later on."

"Now, Duffey, I don't make any mystery about this. I don't get you in a corner in the dark and whisper in your ear. I take daylight for it, and talk right out in the meeting."

"Last night I had the pleasure of overhearing your interview with the little blind girl, out at the Forks. I had cut her brother loose a few moments before, and if I had not wanted to get on to what you two reprobates were up to, I would have preceded the operation by blowing your worthless brains out. Now, I want to know who sent you there to repeat that cock-and-bull story?"

"Pon me soul, it war true, every word on it true."

"That's not the question. Who sent you? Don't I know you wouldn't have nerve enough to do it unless you had backing? We'll get around to the balance by and by."

Duffey hesitated. Indeed he looked warily around. He did not expect any aid, but he would have done without benzine for a week to have found it.

Don't funk at the first fence, or you'll lose your neck before you get over the course. I'm waiting, you understand."

"Kin I trust yer not ter give it away?"

"I'd see you out, if that's all. But don't put on frills; it's dangerous."

"Wal, then, it's Kunnel Starbiddle ez are

ther moovin' power. He's behind it, but I won't derry ez I hev thort ov puttin' up a leetle game ov me own."

"Colonel Starbiddle, eh? I kind of thought so, but I wasn't sure. Say it straight now. What do you mean claiming that girl for your daughter? Ain't it a late stage in the game to be playing that card?"

"Her mother was my wife."

"That's a neat way to put it, if you didn't know better. You told me a story something like that once before; and it didn't seem to wash. Now, I know it won't. I am afraid you want to make the trip to Red Earth at my expense."

"See hyar. Ef I open out it'll bu'st me hyar, sooner er later. Are thar any coin in it? Ef not I may ez well tie up right now, an' let yer do yer wu'st."

"You don't seem to consider the happiness that doing what is right will always bring. I will make this offer. If you and your pard will finish up the job as I want it there will be at least fifty and perhaps a hundred for you to divide."

"That sounds better. I'll reesk it, an' trust to yer honor. Drive on with yer riddles an' I'll answer ez fur ez I can."

"How old was the child when you married the widow?"

"'Bout a year—more er less," was the prompt response.

"And now tell the truth. Do you think it was her child at all?"

"I did in them days, but blamed ef I do now. She'd hed some queer ups an' downs, an' she struck me when I war a-thrivin'. She picked that youngster ez she come out. A woman ez hed ther kid in tow up an' died—Bradley the woman was, Molly Bradley—an' afore she hopped ther twig she up an' told that she'd stole it, part fur vengeance an' part fur coin, an' ther must 'a bin some more ov a dark story hitched into it but that's ez fur ez she got when she keeled over. Nobody wanted ther brat an' Kate took it along. She writ a letter to a frien' in Noo York—that war all that war in it—but she didn't send it, an' I dropped onder it. She never shook ther kid, an' I reckon ther gal are purty well mixed up ez ter jest who she are. I kinder suspect ez Starbiddle knows who Moll Bradley war."

"So do I," commented Harper, with surprising frankness.

"That settles that part. Now, last night you showed a pretty fair acquaintance with Major Sunshine. How did you come to know him?"

"Me an' William Henry Harrison b'longed ter his gang."

"That sounds more unreliable than all the rest, but stranger things have happened. How did you get out of it?"

"He sed he wouldn't hev us at any price an' we warn't wu'th killin' so he kicked us out. After that we kim ter Git Thar, an' hyar we be."

"You know where he hangs out, then."

"I c'd find it, I reckon."

"Well, I want you to call on him and tell him exactly what you've told me. Take your pard along and don't let grass grow under your feet. When you come back I'll give you the fifty; and maybe Sunshine will ante up some more. Call your friend and tell him the job."

Duffey's jaw dropped but he had sufficient strength of mind to raise his finger; and William Henry Harrison came swaggering over.

"You understand, I'll give you a letter that will put him onto the points and when he answers it I'll know you've done the work, and I won't have to shoot."

"Hole on! Yer don't know me er yer wouldn't talk so. I'm a-goin'; an' William Henry Harrison are goin' along with us. Yer needn't squirm, pard. It's got ter be so. I'll take ther letter an' do ther best I kin—angels kin do no more."

"That's all I'm asking, and I'm not afraid of your throwing off on me. You know me of old."

"You bet I do," answered Duffey, hastily. "Never heerd ov yer sayin' more ner yer meant, an' I gamble on yer not doin' ov it now. But ef—I say ef—I war you I wouldn't foller Tom Duffey ter see ef he war goin' ther right road. Ef yer don't b'lieve he knows ther way, don't send him; ef yer does, hev conference. Then I'll feel easy 'bout shootin' ary gerloot ez kims dolgin' round in ther rear. Day-day; I'll see yer later, an' let yer know how it kims out."

"Bring me an answer, you blear-eyed old idiot, or I'll extricate your heart to bait a mink-trap. I mean business. You'll find me here waiting for an answer if it takes a week. So long, and let me see you later."

Duffey and his partner arose, walked to the bar, and looked silently at Rapid Johnny. On Deck Harry nodded, and the stirrup-cups were set out and drained. Then the bummers swaggered away from the Pay Dirt, taking the direct road for the mountains.

No one appeared to watch them, but they looked neither to the right nor the left, nor said a word until they had put a mile between them

and the saloon, and were lost from sight in the shadows of the hills.

Then William Henry Harrison balted, disgust and anger struggling together in his face.

"Say, Tom Duffey, who's sellin' out now fur a drink? I dunno ez you owns me jest yet, ontirely, an' ef yer can't expound what ner thunder you an' him's drivin' at, I'm goin' back ter Git Thar. W'ot's all this mean, aryhow?"

"I ain't stoppin' ter ask, William Henry. He says go, an' I'm goin'," responded Duffey, doggedly. "Didn't I stand him off jest ez fur ez it war safe? Then, when I seen his finger workin', ez though it war cetchin' ter crook, I caved. He's a bad man, William Henry, ther wu'st I ever knew, an' that's ernuf. I didn't ax fur why, er fur what, but I jest started. Pard, I ain't ez dumb ez I look, an' that man's bound ter be on ther winnin' side. Now, jest wag on, er settle with me."

According to the old distich:

"Fleas have other fleas to bite 'em,
And so goes on, *ad infinitum*."

Duffey had found a lower than himself in the person of William Henry Harrison. With much grumbling, but with fair speed, the two trudged on together.

And in spite of all the vagabonds' caution, Traveling Eli was a witness of his departure, and was muttering:

"Hanged ef he ain't goin'. Thar's truth in ther story, an' the reprobate is goin' in ter earn his money. Ef On Deck Harry can bring him to bed-rock, he takes the cake. But I'll bet you he posts Starbiddle fur all that."

CHAPTER XV.

JUDGE LYNCH TAKES THE BENCH.

DURING the day Git Thar had on her somber garments; it was only at night that the bright vermilion appeared. The balance of the day On Deck Harry either strolled about the camp, taking in whatever there was to be seen, or lounged at the Miners' Rest, the hotel at which he was supposed to be stopping.

No one appeared especially interested in him, and he would hardly have guessed that he had attracted any special attention.

Yet there was a rumor all over the camp that vagabond Tom Duffey, and pard had gone away at his bidding, and that beyond a doubt he was something more than the average roving sport. If he had tried he could not well have devised a better plan to apprise the camp that he had some scheme in view. The only wonder was that no one had succeeded in finding out just what he had done.

Pius Pete seemed especially exercised.

He took Colonel Starbiddle to one side the moment he made his appearance at the Pay Dirt.

"I tell yer he's a desp'rit man, an' needs watchin'. Ef he kin an' does git ary thing that looks like work out of Tom Duffey thar orter be a committee 'p'inted. It means suthin'. An' I'm jest cetchin' ter be that committee. You an' me knows thar's a gum game behind it, an' I tell yer, I don't want ter see Sunshine fooled. I don't know much 'bout him, but I do know ez he's a good, square, honest feller, an' ef nobody else kin tackle him Pius Pete are on board. Set 'em up, kunnel, an' then see me go fur him."

"No, no, Peter. Keep your hands off. I know you're willing; but I'm afraid you're not able. I'll set them up with pleasure; and then you can go play draw with Ira Joyce. I wouldn't mind seeing some one slug him, and I guess you're just about his caliber."

Peter hung his head at this rebuke, which was rather sharply spoken; but brightened at the prospect of the whisky. When he had surrounded a fair sample of mountain dew he sidled off toward Ira, who happened to have nothing on his hands. It was not certain that Colonel Starbiddle was in earnest, but his suggestions generally went without question.

"You durned, lazy gerloot, I'm hyar, Pius Petey. Now, what yer wantin' ov me? Talk quick fur I ain't foolin' round hyar long. Got a engagement at ther Miners' Rest, but don't mind bevin' a leetle fun afore I start."

Ira was a surly sort of a fellow, who had been a chief at Git Thar; but at present was a little under the weather. Starbiddle, as has been mentioned, had lately knocked him endways before he could get a gun out, and as a consequence he was decidedly off color with the inhabitants, and in his sober moments had not the least inclination to resent such an address, even from Pete.

There was just one little twitch about his hands, as though instinct was starting them for his revolvers. Then he grinned as he answered:

"Ef yer want fun, Ira Joyce are a mighty poor man ter come to. He's kinder moulthin' like, an' his name jest leads ther roll ov ther men ov ther sick-list. But ef yer means poker with ther back on, I should jedge he's able ter play his cards fur what's in 'em; an' when yer says ther word he's yer man."

"That's what I'm sayin', loud ez I kin utter. Set right down hyar, an' you kin have it fur anything, from penny ante ter a game 'thout limit. I'm lookin' fur yer, pard, an' I'll show yer suthin' 'bout draw afore we git through."

Pete ruffled around bravely enough, but as the two men sat down on opposite sides of the small table, and it was not certain that either had ten dollars to his name, no one was very wildly interested in the probable result of the game. Beyond the passing glance given by one or two, their proceedings remained unnoticed.

The men were pretty evenly matched, both as to skill and capital. As each played with anxious care, and a five dollar bet was reached only by successive raises, neither man stood much show of becoming suddenly and violently rich. Luck swung this way and then swung that, as the two, for half an hour, played in silent earnestness.

Then there was a sudden gleam in Pius Pete's eyes.

Ira was drawing in a three-dollar pot on a little three of a kind, when his antagonist leaned forward and caught him by the wrist.

"Hole on right thar, Ira Joyce," he shouted. "Did yer think yer uncle Pete war asleep? Drap it, I say, drap it! Ef you ain't got two leetle diamond's up yer sleeve I'll eat snakes. Hole him, somebody, hole 'em, while they counts ther kards!"

Everybody looked that way at once, as this was roared out in stentorian tones; and they were just in time to see Joyce half rise, his wrist still in the grasp of Pius Pete, at whom, for an instant, he stared stupidly, and then, as he recognized the enormity of the charge, with surprising readiness his free hand darted behind him and drew a revolver.

But Pete was not idle. He swung himself half-round and half-over the table, catching at the hand that Ira had behind him. Then there was a confused struggle, a shot from Joyce's weapon, and a thundering crash, as both men fell heavily to the floor.

Strangely enough the revolver flew to one side, and the queen and jack of diamonds fell to the other, seemingly to prove the truth of Pius Pete's charge of foul play.

"Now, blast ye, I hev yer foul!" gritted Pete. "You'd play crooked fu'st, an' then murder a man fur findin' ov yer out. I wouldn't disgrace a six by drawin' it on a thing like you be. I'll jest hold yer to ther rack an' beat ther bones out ov yer."

But Joyce was by no means discouraged, though he had his teeth tightly clinched and his muscles all set for a sudden effort. As the crowd gathered around, Pete flew into the air, wrenched from his hold and flung aside by a powerful thrust from Ira's feet. Then the two men sprung up together, and stood facing each other.

"Come, come; what is this all about?" asked Starbiddle, pushing through the crowd.

"What sort of a place do you think you're in, that you can go to shooting and stabbing over a penny-ante game? Who began this racket, and what is it all about?"

"He can't come none ov his slip-card games on me," answered Pete, sullenly.

"He's been trompin' round fur my toes fur a month, an' I didn't want ter dirty my paws playin' ag'in him; but I couldn't stand his rubbin' ov it in, so ter-night I went fur him, an' I'd jest hev snatched him bald-headed if he hedn't worked his roots on me. When I caught him with seven keyards in his hand, I thort it war time ter draw er line. Kunnel, he war a-robbin' ov me, an' I wouldn't 'a' bin no sort ov a man ef I'd 'a' let him take that pot."

"It's a blasted lie!" retorted Ira, shaking with wrath, and yet strangely held in check by the firm speech and gaze of the colonel. "He's bin a-holdin' out, an' walkin' ther pegs ever sence we sot down, an' when he found his seven keyards couldn't beat my five, he throwed 'em in my lap an' began ter squeal. Ef he's man ernuff, I'll argy ther question any way two men kin argy it, an' Git Thar kin say who's right when we git through."

"You couldn't say fairer, Ira. As no one seems to have been watching your little tin-pot game, I don't see that there's any other way to get at the truth, though even that don't count for much. No one would believe either of you on oath, neither can hit the side of a barn, and when it comes to real, downright slugging, I suspect both of you would run away. If Johnny has no objections, though, you might try it on."

"Not here if you please," interposed Rapid Johnny, stepping briskly forward. "There's no man interferes less with fun, but I'd call your attention to the fact that the corpse generally can't, and the survivor won't pay me for the damage done, and you folks don't feel like passin' 'round the hat. When it comes up sudden like I don't feel called on to interfere; but when it's all to be cut and dried beforehand, you really must excuse me if I say, please don't. Go out doors and try it on as much as you want, but in here, not any, I thank you, if this court knows herself."

"Couldn't 'a' said it fairder, Johnny, an' thar's no 'fense. We'll try it on outside, an' you kin make a leetle fortun' on drinks when it's all over," said Pete, heartily. "Some ov you fellows lead him out, I'll be a-waitin'."

"Don't you fret yerself," growled Joyce. "I'm comin' right behind yer; we'll see w'ich ov us'll kum back."

Pete, with several attendants, had by this time reached the door. A shout, and a rush from those nearest announced that there was something unexpected there.

Right at the threshold, doubled all up in a heap, lay a corpse.

"What in blazes are this," exclaimed Pete, who was the first to reach the fallen man. "Thar's bin some foul play ag'in, an' I sw'ar, ef Git Thar don't take hold I'll go it alone. Any ov you folks know him?"

"He's a stranger, Pete—and this little matter won't require much investigating," answered Colonel Starbiddle, pushing his way out. "I guess we'll have to put him on your record. I always told you that you'd hit something if you kept at it long enough."

"What's that ye'r givin' me? Never seen him afore."

"Yes, but you saw Ira, and went him one better. Strangest thing I ever did see. You got off one barrel in the squabble, and that's what ails the stranger. He was coming in as the lead was coming out."

"Blame me ef yer don't talk ez though yer b'lieved it," retorted Pete. "But I'll bet yer a few dozen ez I didn't do it, an' I kin prove it in ther crack of yer thumb. Ira hez ther on'y forty-five in camp. Ef the lead in this gerloot fits it I'll be willin' ter say, guilty."

"Don't be too certain about it, Pete. You didn't take aim, so it's a safe bet you couldn't miss. Bring him along."

The colonel was the master of ceremonies; and the corpse was brought in and laid on a table. The matter in discussion between Pius Pete and Ira Joyce was forgotten.

The dead man was a coarse-looking fellow of middle age, whose face was unfamiliar to the frequenters of the Pay Dirt. He was roughly clad, with knife and revolver belted to him, the handle of the latter being in his grasp, as though in the agony of sudden death he had instinctively sought to draw the weapon.

It was certainly a singular fate that had led this stranger there to meet his death by a chance shot; for no one doubted but that the bullet had found its billet of its own accord, and that Pete had only opened the way to proof of the general opinion when he appealed to the caliber of the missile. It was pretty generally known that the other "guns" in camp were "forty-four."

"But who in blazes is he?" was the question more than one of those present asked, as Starbiddle began to overhaul his belongings.

"Nothing on the corpse to show," answered the colonel, generally, turning toward the crowd.

"He was well heeled, you see, and I guess, wasn't altogether an angel. But outside of weapons and coin there's nothing about him—not a line of writing—to show who he was. Of course it's in order to be sorry for him; but I don't think poor Petey, here, has any call to worry about it. To make it all square for him, though, the best plan would be to organize a little court right here, and see that justice is done. Peter, consider yourself a prisoner till this matter is investigated. Gentlemen, will some one please nominate a suitable candidate for the position of Judge Lynch?"

"But, see hyar. Ef thar's anybody ter blame it's that bloody ole land pirut, Iry Joyce. Ketch onter him; ef he'd played fair I reckon thar wouldn't 'a' bin no trouble nohow."

"Oh, try 'em both, an' clean ther hull matter up at onc't," suggested some one. "Hyar, Iry, walk up ter ther captin's orffice an' settle. Move yer all that ther kunnel takes ther bench."

The whole thing was carried on in a jocular way, and yet it was meant for earnest. There had been several unexplained deaths of a sudden nature; here was a chance to vindicate the law respecting the nature of the camp, and it would not do to let the opportunity slip.

The motion nominating Starbiddle as judge was carried by acclamation, and in the midst of the yell Ira Joyce was shoved up to a position alongside of his late antagonist.

Pete looked as though he wanted to object—perhaps he would have done so if Billy Barker, who had been missing from the Pay Dirt all the evening, had not made his appearance. He edged his way through the crowd, and placed his hand on his friend's shoulder.

"Easy by jerks, old man. It's common sense they're talkin'. It'll save a heap of trouble. You be the pris'ner, and I'll be the counsel. I'll bet you four to one that we'll make the rifle. Git Thar won't blame you for doing what you couldn't help, and every thing'll turn out lovely."

"If it don't it ought to," put in another voice, that the spectators recognized as belonging to Harry Harper.

"The town hardly cares to take up Sunshine's quarrels and I'll swear the dead man's one of his followers."

"How do you know that?" asked Starbiddle, gazing keenly at the speaker.

"I ought to, considering that he robbed me of thirteen hundred dollars within forty-eight hours. He was one of the biggest ruffians unhang, and he answered to the name of Grizzly."

CHAPTER XVI.

A MISSING CORPSE.

"THERE'S something in what the young man says," remarked Starbiddle, coolly. "Lame Charley left the particulars of a raid on his coach, and this gentleman was probably the person carried off. In due time we will hear his testimony."

After that from the colonel no one else seemed disposed to doubt the statement, and it was little likely that any one would make much trouble for the shootist. Pete yielded without hesitation: the evidence was given in the briefest of shapes, the majority of the witnesses being cut short when they seemed inclined to wander a little; a few pertinent questions were asked of Harper, and then the poll of the jury was made—with a triumphant acquittal as the result.

No one thought of doubting the justness of the verdict; and as two-thirds of the town was there, there was no question but what it closed the matter for good.

Harry Harper's explanation had been heard with a good deal of interest, and it was no wonder that Billy seemed inclined to cultivate the sport, and obtain an extended version.

"Odd sort of thing this was, and, do you know, it has half set me to thinking. There was something said last night about a man being shot. Pretty much the same way, wasn't it?"

"Just erbout," responded Barker. "As a stranger I'm not asking questions, and I don't give an answer unless I have to. But I kin see ther idear ye'r steerin' at. Mebbe, if you'd a-looked at ther other corpus you'd have found you'd seen him, afore. It don't explain who's doing this business, but it might throw a heap of light on the subject of what it's done fur."

"And if some one is putting in his spare time picking off Sunshine's men it wouldn't be a bad thing to let him went."

"That's about the size of it."

"But if Peter, the man of piety, got away with this fellow, don't that interfere with the theory?"

"Pete never hit anything in his life that he aimed at, and he hasn't luck enough ter git onto a barn-door if he shut both eyes an' fired in the air."

"Then he didn't drill the lamented Grizzly?"

"Not much he didn't. That court war all a flam. I sometimes think they ain't too anxious to give him a fair show, an' I wanted to git his skirts clear, so thar wouldn't be any room fer afterclaps."

"Then, who do you suspect? I'll swear men don't drop around that way without a reason for it."

"You can't prove it by me. And I'm not tryin' very hard. As long as they don't come my way let ther circus go on. There's precious little harm done."

"You're a philosopher in a straw hat. That's all good enough; but it don't get my money back. What became of the stiff that was laid out last night?"

"Planted this mornin' at sunrise. Those that go under at the Pay Dirt get the proper attention every time."

"You couldn't give me an idea of where to find the corpus? I don't much fancy digging anyhow, and digging for corpses is awful doleful work; but I'd like to see if the late lamented was one of the gang that got my gold."

"I can't. You want a man ov my bigness to go along and hold the lantern, All right. If you'll handle the pick and shovel I'll throw ther loomination on the subject."

"A bargain. I'm in earnest, and you don't look like a man that would throw off. Can't we get out of here all by ourselves alone, without any one being the wiser? There's such a thing as having too much backing—and if they dropped to what we were after the whole town would follow in procession."

"Kerrect. I'll be waiting at the Miners' Rest, and you kin drop out, keerless like. But, say, I would like to have Petey along if he happens to glide our way. He don't seem to be good for much; but somehow he's a lucky man to tie to."

"All right, bring him if you think he can keep a close mouth. I've taken a little stock on him, and it strikes me he talks too loud to tell very much. He seemed inclined to plug me off-hand last night; but I suppose that's only his playful way. We'll know each other better when we get through."

"You hit him off the fu'st clatter. Ther trouble is he wants to wring in with Starbiddle, and thinks the way ter do it is to put on frills an' show a heap of style. But I'll guarantee ter hold him straight. Now, I'll jist back out, an' you kin find me a leetle later."

The two separated, and Billy Barker, after a trifle of chaffing over an apparent effort to get up a game, withdrew, ostensibly in search of a crowd that had more nerve and money.

Billy's skill at draw was pretty well known in the camp, and as he avoided the few big guns that might have cared to tackle him it was not hard to bluff the rest.

On Deck Harry lingered a while, and if he

had made an effort might have met with some social success, but he managed to keep from either exciting interest or giving offense, and though there was some curiosity no one interfered with him. There was a good deal of talk over the dead stranger; and those who were not talking were pursuing their regular avocations. Without any one seemingly conscious of the moment of his disappearance, Harry just melted away.

He had succeeded in covering up his trail pretty well the previous evening though he was aware that there were men looking for him. This evening he made no effort, but sauntered along toward the Miners' Rest.

Billy Barker was waiting for him; and as he had more than half suspected was not alone.

"Pius Petey, a side pard of mine," said Barker.

"I've give him a hint of what we're up to, an' he's agreed ter go along. Mebbe you've met him?"

"Had the pleasure—last night. And I don't know of a man I'd sooner have along in a little excursion like this we propose."

"That's good enuff," responded Pete. "I mout hev bin a leetle too anxious ter press ther 'quaintance las' night; but I wasn't a-knowin' that you an' Billy war ole frien's. Billy's jest ole bizzness, now, ain't he? An' ez fur this hyar graveyard frolic—him an' me's ther identickie gerloots yer want, 'cos I helped ter plant ther stiff. I could find it with my eyes shet; but I've got a lantern, thet'll kim in handy when we want ter 'zamin' his manly figger."

"Lead out then. Of course Git Thar'll drop to what we're after, and I don't know that I'm doing quite the square thing to wring you into it."

"Don't say 'nother word, pard, er you'll make me r'ile. Billy said we'd be with yer, an' all he says goes. An' I ain't thinkin' all Git Thar'll be 'round nuther. It's curious, but every other man hyar b'loves in ghosts; an' them ez does wouldn't go 'thin a mile ov ther place, fur fear ov seein' 'em."

"And you don't believe in them, eh?"

"Thar's whar yer'r out. I b'lieves in 'em every time. But Billy an' me—we ain't keerin' fur 'em. An' I'm jest a-dyin' ter see what a real man ov sand'll do when he strikes 'em. Ef yer runs I'll never git over it."

The three were walking along together as they talked, for it was some distance to the little nook which Git Thar, without any particular formality, had set aside as a grave yard. Billy said little, but he was watching very sharply.

His hand dropped warningly on the shoulder of his friend, as he spoke in a low whisper.

"I'll swar, thar's some one dodging 'round thar now. Maybe it's somebody on ther same errand ez ourselves. Keep quiet tell we find out."

"Guess it was only a shadow," said On Deck Harry, after vainly looking in the direction in which Barker pointed. "We'll find out, though. What did the party look like?"

"Couldn't say; but ef it war likely a woman 'd be dodging around such a place I would say it belonged to ther sex feminine. Don't see any sign of her now, though. If she didn't sink into the ground, whar did she go to?"

"In yer mind, pard. It's too airly in ther game fur 'em anywhar else. Kim ahead. If ther ghostesses kin shoot faster than we kin, er nigher plumb center. I wants ter know. That's all."

It did seem as though Barker had been deceived. There was no sign of any one around now, and no cover to which a specter, or something more material, could have taken. It would not be fair to say that they gathered courage, because they had not shown any sign of being scared; but presently they advanced without further hesitation.

"Right hyar yer be," said Pete, striking with his spade a newly-made mound of earth. "It won't take long ter unkever, an' ef things gits along right smart we'll hev him in no time."

As he spoke he cast aside the first spadeful of ground.

After that the progress was rapid.

The grave was hardly an inch too wide; and it was none too deep. The body had been wrapped in a couple of old blankets and lowered into the hole. Then a board was laid over it, on which the clods of the valley might fall. It was rather a poor substitute for a coffin; but it simplified the work a great deal. Without it the task of removing the dirt would have required a longer time to perform, and would certainly have been much more unpleasant.

The ground was removed and then the board was lifted from its position by Pete, who reached down from above.

"Jest wait a bit now tell I git my lantern lit. Thar ain't no use ter be h'istin' him out ef we kin get a glim on him whar he lies."

"Not a bit," asserted Harry, striking a match. "Only, as I suspected, we're a shade late. There's no corpse here."

It was a fact.

The three were too late with their operation. The old blankets were there, tossed in to help fill up the grave; but the body was gone.

Billy Barker did not seem much troubled;

Harper took the matter coolly, but Pius Pete seemed all broken up at the disappearance.

"An' I helped ter plant him meself," he murmured. "This very mornin' it war, an' we stomped ther s'ile down on him good an' solid. Ef it had been anybody else I'd 'a' thort they war a-lyin'—what'll folks think ov me? What ner thunder are ther meanin' ov it, anyhow?"

"Don't groan so, Peter. We know, of course, that it's the straight thing you've been giving us, and all there is about it is that somebody has been amusing himself stealing the cadaver. Now, what's it been done for?"

"That's jest it. They must 'a' knowed we war a-comin', the pards ov hissen; an' how did they know it? It ain't no leetle game ov yourn, are it? Ef so, I don't see whar the fun kims in at. An' ef not it's durned mysterious, an' don't yer fergit it."

"I don't profess to understand anything, except that a corpse was supposed to be planted here, and isn't here. Of course, no one suspects you of having anything to do with the hocus-pocus. You were too willing to help in the resurrection. But how could any one guess that we would be after the body? Suppose we look around. If we strike a trail we'll follow it, if it goes through the ground and brings us out at China."

"That's my name," put in Barker, who had been examining the ground around the grave.

"We may as well fill in the hole again. Might look a little awkward, you know, if somebody was after us, and dropped to ther facts. Then I think I can put yer on ther track. Ef I ain't mistaken ther's bin somebody here afore us, an' that somebody hez got in thar work. But what yer goin' ter do when yer find 'em?"

"There's no discount on that suggestion. We don't want any one putting ther fingers on us and saying, 'Here's your grave-robbers.' The man that talks fu'st has the inside track. If we had the body we might say something back; but I guess we had better look out fer number one."

He caught up the shovel which Pete had dropped, and began throwing in the dirt.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE COLONEL'S PLOT.

A DOZEN or more men had collected in a tunnel, which looked as if it might belong to an unused mine.

They had reached the place after some careful turning and twisting, but as each man knew his fellow, there was no mummery of masks and dominoes like, after the manner of conspirators.

Chief among them all was Colonel Starbiddle.

"All here I see," he said, as he looked around. "I wanted the men here that I could trust, all the way and back again. The rest of the men are good enough in their way for plain work, but I can't say that I would care to trust them in a pinch. And I didn't want to get yer where they could catch on to anything outside of clean sailing. You understand."

"I reckon that means biz—what we've bin lookin' fur."

"You are right. I've spent some time and some good coin starting a drift for what I know is pay rock. It's going to be too late. She is getting down ahead of us, and her work must stop, or we may as well throw up. That bursts me and leaves you out in the cold. What do you all say?"

"Fur one, I b'l'ieve in h'istin' ther woman out an' us in. Ef she stan's in ther way an' suthin' drops on her we ain't ter blame. She's bin foolin' 'round an' ain't done nothin'; ain't it best now ter let men take hold? It's 'bout ez eazy ter jump a cla'me above ground ez onderneath, w'ot yer waitin' on?"

"As usual, Peters, you have a very level head. But I can tell you, the woman expects some such move, and is more than half ready for it. If we try to walk into the Spread Eagle there will be some tough work."

"W'ot's ter hinder?"

"Black Moll is to hinder, and the men standing at her back."

"W'ot men are those?"

"Men you haven't seen—men that haven't been in Git Thar. The chances are they are the kind to stay—that they were picked out to stay and shoot. Just remember that there are some men in Git Thar that I don't own. If we kill too many they will kick, and if we get the worst of it there will be nobody caring but ourselves."

"Right you are. Ef she's got a gang ez kin lay over us so, ther orn't ter be. But they can't do it, that's all. We'll try 'em a hustle, an' I'll bet all my coin that we'll kim out jay-bird anyhow. Now, let's hear what sort of a rattle it is we've got ter make."

"How do you all say? Are you willing to stand the chance of hard knocks? Speak out."

A low, but unanimous consent ran along from one member to another of the crowd.

"That's what I wanted to hear, and what I expected. I wasn't quite sure, though. There may be some killing done, but that's the chance of war and no one thinks anything of it if it happens in such a racket."

"Ez long ez it's down on ther right side? Eh?"

"That's about the size of it!"

"An' who d'yer think we've got ter buck ag'in?"

"They are men whom Black Moll has brought here, and that is about all I can say of them. They stick close; and fully half of them have not been inside of Git Thar. That's what makes me suspicious."

"Ye'r sure the dandy sport ez dropped in at ther Bed Rock lately—On Deck Harry—ain't suthin' ter do with it? He's a hummer from 'way back, an' er had man ter buck ag'in. I'd just ez soon not hev him on ther other side."

"Don't be excited about that young man. He is on an entirely different lay, and will not be likely to give us any trouble. In fact he is working our game for us. He made a little mistake trying to throw us off the scent, and for a trifle I almost thought he was going to chip in on her side, till I got it down to rights."

"All right, ef you say so; but ef he don't shake Git Thar up afore he leaves it, it won't be much like the way he jinerally does business."

"He may shake till he's tired, as long as he don't shake us. The bigger picnic he has with the balance of the boys the more water it is on our wheel."

"But don't yer see that ther nat'ral cussedness ov ther man'll make him chip, one side er 'other, ef thar's a cirkiss while he's 'round? An' he's one ov them fool critters w'ot won't go ag'in' a woman, ef I know any thing 'bout him. He's jest sure ter buck ag'in' ther biggest crowd. An' that'll be we, us, an' company."

"There's something in that; but if he happens to be very busy with his own affairs he's not the man to drop them, even for a woman. And to make all sure, I'll see that the business is provided, if it don't come along of itself. Don't forget that when I told you what there was in the Spread Eagle, I offered you, win or lose in the long run, to pay big wages if you only held out for a week after we once got in. You stand to win anyhow the cat jumps, while I may be broken all up. You have the long end of the string if I do arrange for the pulling."

"Yer couldn't a-spoke it fairder, an' we're goin' ter stay by yer till ther thing's over," responded another, who answered to the name Gray Hawk.

"We've bin takin' ov your coin, an' we're just gentlemen ernuf not ter go back on yer till we've made yer squar'."

"That is all I ask. You all say you'll stay by me to the end!"

Gray Hawk was only a little in advance of the rest, but all responded the same way to the appeal. The crowd intended to stay.

"That's the way I like to hear you talk. Now, you understand that I don't want to do any harm to this woman; but she must be gotten out of the way somehow; and as you all seem of the same mind, suppose I make a suggestion."

"This cross-cut is all very well if it is made at the right place; but I'm very much afraid that if we rely on that alone, somebody is going to get tripped up bad. My idea now, is that Black Moll had better retire to a country boarding house for the sultry season. That will save her from getting hurt, anyhow; and without her in the way, things may be a little easier for us."

"Kunnel, ye'r talkin' solid sense," put in Gray Hawk, gradually lowering his voice as he spoke.

"An' ef yer thinks thet any ov ther reg'lar lay-outs are too expensive, er hez other disadvantages, I kin tell yer ov a elegant cottage, jest about, say two foot by five eight, rock-bottom an' sides, quiet, secluded, jest ther spot fer medertashuns an' prayer, whar thar won't be no introoders. Say ther word ter me an' Pard Jimsy, an' thar she goes."

"No, Gray Hawk, that won't do. I may need her—need her bad. She's worth five hundred to me alive, on a guess. I wouldn't have any sudden sickness happen her until after things were run through for twice that money. She must be kept above ground and able to talk, but whar she can't talk until there's no chance of needing her. After that, if she disappears, I sha'n't feel troubled, though I don't ask that she should."

"All right. You're ther doctor. I know furdar, a elegant spot fur that too. Jest ez secluded; but above-ground, an' a chance ter breathe, with a cellar 'bout a thousand foot deep under it. I'll hev her lungs in good workin' order tell yer say stop. When's ther job ter be did?"

"Glad to see that you're ready. The sooner the better, so it is done without making a racket. I'm not so sure that she is as much alone as she seems to be. I've had her shadowed, you understand, and she has her visitors. You will have to pick your time. If anybody turns up to look on, they must drop or go off in the same boat."

"Kerrect; but I wouldn't put too much onto that Pius Pete ter look after. I don't say ez he wouldn't try ter kerry ther news all squar'; but he don't know beans, he's sich a blamed fool."

"Don't trouble yourself about Peter; he's use-

ful. Just get down to business. Within the next twenty-four hours, get Moll out of the way, and I'll find work for the rest of you within the next forty-eight. I'll be with you all to-morrow night, and perhaps we will be able to begin. Remember, it's a hundred dollars apiece besides your wages, anyhow; and it may be a share in a million. I'm generally better than my promises, so you can figure something on what you may expect."

There was a subdued murmuring of approval.

"Pity yer didn't drop to the vally ov ther strike afore Moll dropped inter it. It would 'a' saved a heap ov trouble. It war layin' thar, ready fur some one ter begin work on; but who'd 'a' thunk ther Spread Eagle war wu'th a hundred dollars' wu'th ov work? After them pards threw up on it, clean starved out, I wouldn't 'a' stuck a pick inter it fur a clean title."

"It's a great pity, Peters, as you observe; but we can't always know everything," answered Starbiddle, dryly. "The next best thing is to go in when we see the chance."

"That's so, Captain Brown!"

The exclamation came from the shadows beyond, and acted like a galvanic shock on every man there. They wheeled about as one, and as they wheeled they drew.

"Go slow!" thundered the same voice. "I've got ther kunnal kivered, an' one more. I want ter know how long this hyar thing's bin goin' on an' what it 'mounts to?"

Starbiddle's hand halted in its search for a weapon. He was cool enough to understand what he heard, and quick enough to see that the words were no empty boast.

A man stood with his back to the wall and his hands extended.

"Hold on, boys, till we see what this means," said the colonel, without a trace of excitement in his tones.

"I guess we haven't struck a rank, blank, staring lunatic. If we have and he won't listen to reason, there's enough of us to take him out of the weather. If we haven't it may be worth while to know what he wants. Who are you, man; what do you mean by this intrusion?"

"I dunno ez I'm called on ter answer any questions; an' ef I begun ter shoot afore I axed any I dunno but what mine-law would kerry me out in it. But I'm willin' ter give yer all one chance fur yer white alley. I b'lieve I'm ther boss ov this lay-out; I b'lieve I paid out good hard coin fur ther right, title an' molyerments ov this claim, w'ich ther same are dooly recorded at ther register's offfis; I b'lieve ye'r a gang ov bloody claim-jumpers. Now, what yer goin' ter do—run er fight? I don't keer a cuss w'ich."

"You buy this claim? Why, old man, you couldn't buy the one side of it."

"Don't worry yerself 'bout Travelin' Eli's finanshull condishun. It's currently reported that he's able ter pay fur what he makes a contract; an' this time it war all cash on ther nail. Ef I made a barg'in it ain't nobody else's biz, but it are fur'em ter listen ter reason. You fellers git; an' ef yer come back ag'in you kin jest settle down to ther 'stablished fact ez thar'll be blood on ther floor. You all hear me?"

"We hear you, most certainly; but, if you'll take a little solid instruction it's a disadvantage to be so fresh. There is no evidence that you are what you say—the owner of the mine. There is decided evidence that I have something of a title to an undivided half. Under such circumstances I don't exactly see how you are to put us out, and keep us out. It looks to me as if the facts were all the other way."

"I ain't keerin' fur facts what are the other way. What I'm gamblin' on are facts this hyar way. I've bought this claim, got my title recorded, done a hundred dollars' worth ov work, an' now I'm a holdin' this hyar shaft at ther pint ov ther pistol. You kin git, er drop, an' take yer ch'ice mighty quick. Look in me eyes an' see ef they don't say, shoot."

"But we've only got your word, my friend. We have not heard of any such sale elsewhere. It don't seem reasonable."

"Wasn't I tryin' ter tell yer ther good news, down at ther Pay Dirt, las' night, when yer wouldn't lissen? Yer jest blowed me up. Now, ther blowin's goin' ter be on t'other side, an' that side mine. Last time ov askin'. Git in, er git out."

The one man was talking very straight. If he didn't mean it Colonel Starbiddle couldn't believe the evidence of his senses and judgment. With sudden sternness he cried:

"Look out for his pards, boys. Up and at him!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

A CRY ON THE HILL.

"My friends, go slow. You may be good men, and Eli, here, a perfect little angel; but under the circumstances I guess I'll have to take you all in."

The interruption came just in time. In the second of silence that followed the order of the colonel the first words were heard; after hearing them everybody was willing to wait for the balance.

The tones were not familiar to many, but they were certainly those of a woman.

"Black Moll, by the fiends!" exclaimed Starbiddle.

"Yes, Black Moll; or Jane Hetherington if you wish to speak with the politeness that generally characterizes your dealings with the softer sex. As I am not trusting to that suavity of manner for which you have always been remarkable I have brought my friends in force. Don't compel me to call in their assistance in the little discussion that is to ensue. They are not noted for glibness of tongue; but I have chosen them specially with reference to their education in the useful arts. Every man of them can handle his weapons after the manner of an expert."

"Ef it's a woman talkin' I'm listenin'; but blame my eyes ef this don't git me," was the subdued remark of Travelin' Eli. "Mebbe ef you folks would jest chaw each other up it'd leave plain sailin' fur me. Go ahead! I ain't takin' stock one way er t'other, till you git yer animosity settled."

But though Eli leaned back with a quiet air it might have been remarked that the muzzles of his revolvers remained as before, and his eyes were just as watchful.

If this was not all *bona fide* he did not mean to be taken unawares.

And Starbiddle did not move.

It was not likely that his case could be any worse through temporary inaction. He and his men stood just under the flaring light of a torch, that was stuck in a cleft, right above his head. The illumination was none of the grandest, but such as it was it shone upon them, making them fair marks; while beyond, and at the back and beek of Black Moll, the colonel could only see vague shadows, though they were shadows that might shoot, and shoot again.

"It is a little early in the game to show my hand," continued the woman, "but, determined as I am to uphold my rights, I would willingly avoid bloodshed. Colonel Starbiddle, if you are wise you will leave Git Thar at once and forever. Swear to me to go and I will withdraw my men, and allow you to pass out of this trap unmolested."

"Ha, ha! Why, madam, you must be crazy!" The colonel had recovered his balance; his voice expressed nothing but healthy amusement.

"I am not aware that I am in any way seeking to harm you; or that in any way I am doing anything that is not just and lawful. I am here on my own ground—"

"Stick a pin right thar—ye'r on my ground, all, both, each ov yer. Don't furgit that. But you kin settle up yer leetle diff'rences; an' then I'll hev my say-so. Eli kin wait."

"The man is wrong, though he speaks with more honesty than you do. He may even have bought this claim and had it recorded, though the only man who could have sold it to him has lost his right in it years ago. It is not very likely he would come forward as a witness in the matter, when, by so doing, he would put his worthless head in a noose."

"But that is nothing here nor there. It is with you I am dealing now—to you that I am talking. Right here, before these witnesses, I give you warning."

"You have discovered that the Spread Eagle is a more valuable plant than you had ever imagined when it was in the market; and you have been plotting and planning to take possession of it. You might have done so long ago if you had been possessed of the courage it took to go in against the will of the former holder."

"Oh, you are villain enough, Colonel William Starbiddle; but you hadn't the courage to undertake the Spread Eagle until you were reasonably sure that Walter Gruel was dead. You think he is, and that it is safe to go against a poor, lone woman."

"Don't deceive yourself. Walter Gruel is not dead; and I have friends that are abundantly able to cope with any force you choose to send against us."

"I assure you, my dear madam, that you are completely mistaken. I would do you no harm in any event; and I know nothing whatever in regard to the man you call Walter Gruel. Moreover, I have no designs whatever against the Spread Eagle. I think it is undisputed that I own the Blue Jay, and the Blue Jay I am working for all that is in it. But how does that conflict with any right you may have in a different property?"

"Then why are you not in the Blue Jay? You are talking now to gain time. Let me tell you that it will do you no good. This thing may as well be settled here and now. You know who Walter Gruel was as well as I do. He made the first strike here; and this very shaft stood recorded in his name, as did the Spread Eagle, until it passed into the hands of his partner."

"What followed after that makes no difference as long as I have a clear title. I acknowledge that you have the apparent ownership of the Blue Jay, as it was first located; but you are not weighty enough to swing one end around till it runs through the richest part of the Spread Eagle. If you try to do it I'll kill you."

Very deliberate was the woman; and very earnest. It was no wonder then that Starbiddle was silent. If she began work then and there the odds were very much in her favor, if the silent row of men were as good as he had reason to believe them to be.

Yet it was hardly to be expected that the leading citizen of Git Thar was going to be completely backed down by a woman. With a gilt-edged reputation, such as the colonel's, something had to be done, if not on account of his own peculiar badness, then to save his reputation with his followers.

Traveling Eli gave him the chance he was waiting for.

"Ther ole woman hez got it down fine," he said. "She knows more ner anybody I know ov 'cept Eli. Ef ther man thet called hisself Carden war ter come back he mou't hev suthin' ter say ter you."

"Let him come then!" exclaimed the colonel, throwing his hand up, with a quick, unperceived motion.

There was a roar that was almost deafening, and away went the torch, splintered and extinguished by a marvelously sure shot.

"Fire!" rung out the clear voice of Jane Hetherington.

And in response to her order, there was a ringing volley of firearms and a regular storm of bullets.

Strangely, though, there were no answering groans; and if sound told anything, there were no shots fired in return. The fighting was all on one side.

It only took a moment for Black Moll to learn this fact, and at a word the tempest of lead ceased.

For an instant there was utter silence in the darkness. Then there was a flare of light and Jane Hetherington was looking over the field.

Not a sign of the enemy was there.

Starbiddle was not ready for a fight when the advantage seemed so strongly against him, and when darkness came he and his men had dodged down and scurried away with a suddenness that was so unexpected as to insure success. By the time the light came, every man of the colonel's party had reached in safety the open air.

"Shell we hold ther fort?" asked Peters, wheeling, with both his revolvers out. "It's a blamed sight easier ter do frum this side than it war frum down below."

"Of course it is; but I don't think it altogether judicious. They have it; let 'em keep it," responded the colonel. "It was lucky, perhaps, that we met where we did, because we've got an idea of what sort of a game will be played against us. There's no use watching here, anyhow. Undoubtedly there is a connection somewhere to the Spread Eagle, and by this time they have slipped back as quietly as they came. I only wish I knew whether they took Traveling Eli with 'em."

"Mebbe we kin git a chance ter give him a lick, anyhow. We got ther measure ov his game, an' it ain't wu'th while ter hold off."

"Let Eli alone. We were poaching in his preserves, and can't blame him if he got up to hawl. He has his uses, and I can't afford to lose him just yet. Of course, if he begins to kick outside, that will be a different thing. Two of you watch, and let me know if anything turns up. Three or four had better go to the Pay Dirt, and the balance can keep with me."

"But, kunnel, it strikes me ther other party hez bin lookin' inter our hands; an' ef they know what ther next play are goin' ter be, mebbe they kin trump it an' not half try."

Starbiddle smiled viciously.

"What could you do with a 'big hand' if you didn't show up some of your cards? I won't say that I wanted Black Moll to look into mine, but can't you see that we've had a sight of hers? She's a woman and don't want to kill so she's made a big bluff. It won't win, because I know my hand is better. Unless she can fool Eli—which I don't think she can—he'll be a watchdog looking two ways. She must be near the end, for she is only playing for time. She sha'n't have a day. In two, we'll make the rifle. I see my way. March, and follow orders."

They were accommodating ruffians, under pretty fair discipline. There was no answer, but silently they moved off without expressing any curiosity as to what plans the colonel might have.

The separation, as Starbiddle had indicated, was made without trouble, and the colonel, with four or five of his toughs at his heels turned his steps in the direction of the cabin at the Forks.

"It's a pity that Pete was not there," he remarked a little later. "He never does much, but he's one of those lucky men that it pays to have around. Nothing but his luck pulls him through."

"You're right. It war luck 'that stood by him to-night. I told yer ef it hed left him jest half a minnit he'd been swingin' in ther lane—er som'eres else, 'bout this time."

"And thar'll be a holy picnic yit betwixt them two fellers. They're bound ter j'ine somewheres, an' it'll be biz frum the word go. You hear me?"

"We hear you; it is not necessary to be so

emphatic. My idea is that Peter can take care of himself, and that win or lose, he is earning his salary."

Still Starbiddle did not give any inkling of his plan, whatever it might be, and as his answers were not very cordially spoken, silence settled down upon them.

It was not hard to guess which way they were going. If they were not to pay a visit to the two waifs of Git Thar it looked as though a good deal of good shoe-leather was being wasted.

"Halt!" tersely exclaimed the colonel, as they debouched upon the narrow trail that led up to the cabin.

Halt it was, though the order was given half under breath.

"I don't care about the job, but I don't see how we can get along without it. It sounds ridiculous I know, but I've a notion that the two little birds up yonder either will sing, or can be made to sing. To-night we will try it."

He might have proceeded to give some further explanation had there not been an unexpected interruption. There was a great cry, the sound of a pistol-shot and a succession of screams.

CHAPTER XIX.

STOLEN AWAY.

THE two waifs of Git Thar had spent this day pretty much as they had spent other days since they had occupied the cabin on the hill.

As evening drew near, however, Syringia seemed to grow nervous, and even Pet could notice that she was strangely distraught.

"What is it, Sy?" he asked. "You are not looking for father now, are you?"

"Never mind, Pet, I do not know what I expect. By and by I will tell you all."

The answer satisfied the little fellow, and he did not again attempt to arouse the girl when she appeared to be lost in her own thoughts. He only sat and watched her until his eyes grew heavy, and he fell asleep.

Syringia's quick ears heard a cautious step without.

She showed some agitation; but no fear. She was expecting a visitor, and to her it seemed that the coming man was Tom Duffey. When there was a knock at the door she answered softly:

"Come in."

The door opened, and admitted a total stranger, who halted at the threshold, and stood looking at her with a sinister smile.

She could not see him, yet something in the silence told her that he was not the man she expected.

"Who are you, what do you want?" she asked, with a little tremor in her tone, in spite of the brave look with which she faced him.

He stepped lightly toward her, made a sudden grasp, gathering both wrists in one of his hands, while the other was placed over her mouth. Then, only, he spoke, sharply:

"Not a word, girl. You know the dangers that environ you here. Night and day you are being watched by those who would harm you in a moment if they thought you could not be used. I come from your father, to take you to him. Make no sound."

She could not well help but obey, since hand and mouth were both locked by his fingers of steel. A faint struggle or two—perhaps more from nervous surprise than from determined resistance—and then she was passive and quiet in his clutch.

"Ah, that is sensible. You have a brother somewhere around. Where is the young cub? I suppose I must bring the whole family, though there was nothing said particularly about him."

Syringia closed both lips and eyelids tightly. It was plain that she intended to give no answer.

At that the intruder gave a low whistle.

Though the sound was so slight it was heard; and in more than one direction.

Through the outer doorway came two men; while Pet suddenly made his appearance from the couch where he had been sleeping.

The boy was dazed by his sudden awakening, but he had grasped the revolver that he knew very well how to use, and had he been a trifle more self-possessed might have made it very sultry for some one. He stared around him, and his eye fell upon Syringia.

At sight of her his hand went up, with his finger on the trigger; but it did not rest long enough to admit of a shot. From behind a stronger hand forced his own up, while an arm went around his neck.

"All right, captain, I have the little whelp; now, it's time to pull out. The horses are ready, and Bill can help bring the girl."

"Away with you, then; I need no help, and will follow."

It was done, in a moment more. The two were lifted, carried out, and thrown on horseback in front of their two captors, who were mounted.

The third man was mounting, too, when something descended upon him like a thunder-bolt.

"What's gwine on hyar? Take dat; an' you men, dar, jes' hole on!"

"That," was a solid blow, from a wooden

cudgel that looked very much like a pick-handle and the stroke sent the man sprawling.

"Butternut! You Butternut, dar! Kim quick. Dey has done gone kerryin' away Missey Sig!"

The old colored woman was around, and without respect for pistols or persons. With half a chance she would at least have made things very uncomfortable for the abductors.

Unfortunately the mounted men were taking no chances. Instead of waiting to see what had happened they bolted at once.

The man that was down had a thick skull, and perhaps they gambled on that—with a pretty sure knowledge of what was going to win.

At all events, the fellow was only temporarily stunned by the blow, and as Butternut came crashing through the bushes, he rose to his feet and took a quick shot at the approaching figure.

His aim was very true, for the negro threw up his hands and went down, while the marksman slipped quietly away. Milkweed had gone yelling down the path, her voice beginning to fade away in the distance.

She was already off the trail of the horsemen, and if her head was not clean gone, her words and actions were likely to very much mislead the little squad that suddenly rose right in front of her.

She halted instantly when she saw them, wringing her hands in a helpless sort of way.

"Oh, de good Lawd! Whar'll I fine her—de blessed lamb? She's done gone, jess suah nuff! Bin kerried away. I knowed it—I jess knowed it! Dar wasn't no good comin' outen this! Der lam'! Der blessed lam'!"

"It's one o' them blamed darkies at the Forks," grunted Peters. "I reckon suthin's happened to ther kids. Orter got hyar sooner, kunnel."

Starbiddle darted at the woman, seizing her by the throat.

"Who's gone?" he shouted. "What do you mean by saying she's gone? Has any harm come to those children? If there has, I'll take payment out of your worthless black hide. What are you good for, anyhow?"

"Good ter holler, mass'r, an' I'm a-yellin' fur all thet's out. Dey took Missey Sy—them free bad white men. I spects dey's berry bad men, fer dey didn't stop wuf a cent when I spoke to 'em. I brung one feller wid der pick-handle, but he didn't seem ter mind it, an' de odds jest rode erway. Git yer hosses, kunnel, fur de lub ob hebben get hosses, fur you can't do nuffin' a-foot."

"But who was it?" persisted the colonel.

"How can we expect to track them unless we know something to start with?"

In a few broken words the colonel was informed of the whole story, such as it was, while his men, gathered around him, listened curiously. As they were not fully in Starbiddle's confidence, they were not altogether certain that this was just like him to play such a joke on his followers! Peters was a little astonished at the sharp, decided way he spoke, as he turned from the old woman.

"You three get into saddle as quick as you can—the wench is about right. Take the trail as soon as you can find it, and don't leave it till you know where they went to. Hang on hard, and don't stop at killing two or three, if you can get the children back. If the odds are too big, stay and watch, but send one man back to let me know how things are. I'll be with you just as soon as I can get around to it. Curses on the luck! Why couldn't this have happened some other time? But I'll be there, and even before I'm done with them. Off you go!"

"But, kunnel, how yer goin' ter run things hyar ef we're not round?"

"Dry up on that, and attend to business as I tell you. There are other men besides you in the world, and if I jingle a few yellow boys I can have more of them than I want. Scatter out, curse you, scatter out! I have no time to waste with you."

Then he whispered a few words, and as Peters took command of the expedition, it was natural that to him these parting orders should be given. He went to work at once, and in a way that showed he understood his business.

To lose no time, he started promptly on the trail, sending two of the boys to bring up the horses. While he was getting his bearings on foot, they could be using the time to the best advantage, so that not many minutes would be lost.

Milkweed saw them all depart without saying another word. When she was once more alone, she turned back toward the cabin; and when she had gone perhaps fifty yards, she found Butternut lying senseless in the path.

She bent over him, not half as much excited as she had been, notwithstanding the fact that he was motionless, and there was blood on his face. She caught him by the collar and gave him a shake.

"You, Butternut! Things am a-wu'kin'. Git up dar, an' be ready fur ter trabble."

He was not altogether dead, for he gave a grunt, and moved slightly.

"Git up dar, I say. Things am a-wu'kin'!"

"I sh'd jedge."

"You ole brack lazybones, quit yer foolin'. Dey's fru hyah, an' it's time ter start."

"Plumb fru' de nozzle, I sh'd jedge."

"Wot's dat yer tryin' ter git fru' yer? De bullet wot hits you plumb in der nozzle ain't goin' ter get no funder. Jist you quit yer foolishness. It ain't eben made a hole. I'm a-wantin' ob yer. I ain't a-torkin' twicet, neider."

While talking she had been hastily examining the head of her spouse, and was speaking entirely by card. The bullet had indeed struck him full in the center of the forehead, but had glanced upward, doing little more damage than the breaking of the skin for a couple of inches. Butternut may have been stunned, but it was just as likely that he had only been too frightened to yell.

Her fingers in his wool cured all that. He was up in a moment.

"All right, I'se er comin'. Wh—what yer want done? Ye'r jist ther coixin'ist ole woman outen jail. Yer knows Butternut can't say no."

"Yer better wouldn't, dat's all. Didn't dey say ef ary thing happen we-uns wah ter stay dar tell dey kim back? Suffin's gwine ter happen, an' we better be dar afore it comes along."

The programme was indefinite; but such as it was the two were ready to carry it out. Without delay they hurried back to the cabin and took possession, entirely uncertain what had become of the "chillun," and not half as much moved by the bereavement as Git Thar would have supposed.

CHAPTER XX.

ALDA BANG GROWS EMPHATIC.

THE three men that had been exploring the burying-ground of Git Thar finished the work of filling in the empty grave, and started to return quietly to the camp.

Their quest had not furnished the proof of identity that On Deck Harry had suggested it would, but it had shown that there was a reason why its secret must be preserved.

That, of itself, was suspicious.

"Better luck next time," said Harper, cheerfully. "Of course it was only a matter of curiosity to me, and I can't say that I am any too anxious to mix in the affairs of this Major Sunshine. I've met him, and the net results of the interview were not so comfortable as to produce a very great desire to meet him again—unless it was all with the bulge on my side. We might have been more profitably engaged playing poker at the Pay Dirt. But, so it goes. Of course we will continue to be silent about this little expedition?"

"We better would. But mebbe thar's more ner curioserty on your side ov ther house. Ef yer'd on'y jest name yer game we might tell yer how ther keards are a-goin' ter run. Eh, Billy?"

It was a fair offer from Pius Pete, but it was met by a laugh, and a few light words.

"You fellows think I've got something on hand, but you're wide off. I'll give it to you straight that I started with quite a little pile for Git Thar, meaning to give the fattest tiger there a hustle. I got cleaned out down almost to bed rock, and now I've nothing to say. I'm open to a spec. If you haven't one to offer you can expect me to hang around the Pay Dirt, playing at penny ante until I rake in enough of a starter to get me at something bigger. Have you heard of anything that would fit a man of my size?"

"Pard, yer hit ther camp at a mighty bad time onless it's fur solid work with shovel an' pick. We bin playin' round betwixt us, an' livin' offen ther av'rage profits tell most ov ther coin in camp hez got inter ther best man's hands; an' it's likely ter stay thar until thar's another strike. Thar's plenty ov holes in ther ground, an' a heap sight ov diggin', but so fur Git Thar ain't panned out much but pure cussedness, an' cold meat fur breakfast. Kunnel Starbiddle mout be a good man fur you ter tie to; but you an' him didn't seem ter hit it las' night. Ef yer wants ter see him I'll do ther 'greeable. He mout make yer a boss, or some sich. He's ther on'y man I know ov thet's got rocks, outside of ther gang thet runs ther s'loons."

For once Pius Pete seemed in the mood for good, common sense, and his rather lengthy explanation held together somewhat more than his average utterances. He did not notice that Barker was watching him, and appeared struck with what he said, though he laughed as Harper answered:

"Thanks for your good intentions, old man, but don't you think, as the colonel has the coin, he would be the man to buck *against*? Not to say that I mean to do it; but that's the way it would look to me, on general principles."

"Don't mix me up, pard. I war on'y showin' yer ther lay-out hyar. Buy yer own candy, an' go fur Scott."

"That's hearty, and I'll make a note of it. Now, I want to ask a question or two that's really none of my business, though it looks as though there might be money in it. I had a fellow-passenger in the coach when Sunshine went for it, who seems to have totally disap-

pared. Have either of you seen anything of a lady that might answer to the name of Governor Bang's daughter?"

"Eh?" said Pete, sharply.

"Alda Bang, I believe her name is. She went on with the stage, and since I've got in I can't find a soul that's seen or heard of any such a party. Lame Charley didn't seem to give very full particulars about the racket—maybe you took in something. Well, from what Johnny Goodman said, there's money in the damsel."

"Alda Bang, I think yer said?"

Billy Barker spoke at last.

"What do yer know about her?"

"Precious little," responded On Deck Harry, carelessly.

"I just got around to it that there might be profit in knowing a great deal more. As I heard it, somebody gouged her old man, while he was in the land of the living, and now she wants to even things up. Of course I offered my services; but she told me that she had to paddle her own canoe. That may have been all bluff. If she's here on business, you can bet your life on it that sooner or later she must disburse! A woman can't do much alone; and when she takes a man in for the heavy work, of course she must calculate on giving him all he is worth, and a little more."

"You're sure that it was Alda Bang, herself?" asked Billy Barker.

"You know old Goodman, over at the Fork. I'm just putting up on his say so. If you think it worth while fer a feller to believe him I'll follow the thing up. I'd like to know where she went. You haven't seen anything of her, have you?"

"Heavens! no. And thar's somethin' more ner strange about it. She didn't come in on ther stage; an' nothin' war said 'bout her bein' lost. Leastwise no such woman as her hes bin spoke ov. An' that's kinder strange. You sure you're givin' it to us straight?"

"Straight as a line, my friend. Do you know anything about Governor Bang's daughter?"

"Nothin', nothin'," hastily answered Billy Barker. "I was jest a-wonderin' what would be bringin' her this way. It's a mighty bad place for a young an' innocent damsel, an' Goodman orter knowed better than to let her come."

"That's what I've been thinking. But I guess from what I saw of her, she's one of the kind that don't ask whether she can come or not. She just goes where she wants to. Well, say, pard! If you happen to drop on to her whereabouts let me know, will you? I don't think I'd like to see her tumble into that Starbiddle's hands."

"You bet we'll let yer know. If that's yer lay-out yer needn't say 'nother word. Whenever you open a game you kin jest be a-gamblin' thet you hev two men in this camp ez are willin' ter look out—at ther aver'idge percentage."

"But suppose you should happen to see Star trying to corral a sleeper. Do you think you'd have nerve enough to shout?"

The pertinent question did not receive an answer. The three seemed to be more or less feeling each other, with an eye to a proposition of some kind from one side or the other, but just as they approached a point where an understanding was not so far off there came an interruption—as sudden as it was unexpected. Some one was approaching, and looking up at the sound of light footsteps, On Deck Harry saw Alda Bang herself.

The light was none too good, but his eyesight was keen and he knew that he was not mistaken.

"Drop out, boys, and keep your eyes and ears open. She hasn't seen you yet, and I'll try and find out what's in the wind."

It happened that Billy Barker and his friend were well in the shade, and though Harper was pretty certain that he had been seen, he felt confident that the others had not. And if they obeyed his hasty warning there would be a chance for him to interview the young lady without their hearing, directly, the result.

Barker and Pius Pete took the hint at once, with a readiness that showed how promptly they could accept a suggestion. Harper spoke in a low tone. Before the words were fairly out of his mouth they had disappeared so completely that he could almost fancy that they had never been there at all.

All the same he did not care to have them overhear the interview—if such there should be—and he quickened his pace, advancing directly toward the young lady, who wandered along as though a midnight promenade was a thing of course, and it was not an unusual thing to be found strolling toward a graveyard, well on toward midnight.

She did not start, or manifest either surprise, fear or annoyance, when Harper halted in front of her, and raised his hat as he made a jaunty bow.

"I'm not mistaken," he said, in his silkenest tones.

"It is my late companion in the stage. Really, I didn't expect this pleasure, though I might have known, and saved myself barrels of tears while I was pondering over your possible fate. So, we both got away."

"You seem to have done so—I was never seriously incommoded. Major Sunshine's lieutenant was all that could be desired as a collector of revenue, and sent me on my way with no care, except for your possible fate. As you had been sensible enough to take my advice, and offer no resistance, I might have known that you would not meet with any serious ill-treatment. The worst that you suffered, I suppose, was a journey on foot."

"I've met matter-of-fact individuals before, Miss Bang, but I never came across them quite up to your style. You think, of course, that when I found no one who knew of your arrival at Git Thar, I was not at all concerned. I wouldn't reason that, as you were coming here with a mission, some one had an interest in seeing that you did not arrive, and lay plans accordingly. I swear to you, after inquiry in all available directions, I was just getting ready to raise a party and start out to the rescue. It's a satisfaction to see you safe; but it makes one want to—well, to kick himself for having been idiot enough to worry."

"And you have been worrying? How kind of you! And about me? Verily, there has been a pair of us. I have dropped down here so quietly that my coming has raised no commotion. That is all there is of it. Had I known that you would be inquiring after me, I would have placed a bulletin behind the bar, at the Pay Dirt—I believe that is the name of the temple where you gentlemen burn your incense, and offer up your thanksgiving, immediately upon your arrival."

"I would have seen it there, I'll admit, but would have more naturally looked for something of the kind at the Miners' Rest. I hope you won't judge of me by my non-combatant line at the Sunshine interview. I assure you my course there was governed solely by what you thought was your interest. It would have saved time and trouble if I had stood on my hand at the outset. If I can be of any service now command me. You have something in view or you would not be perambulating the rural districts at this hour of the night. Can I assist you? Will you accept of me as an escort?"

"Thanks for your offer. I do not need you as you understand it; yet you might be of some service to me if you would. Not to beat about the bush, I came here expressly to meet you. If you have a few moments at your disposal and are willing to listen, I will explain."

"Good heavens! A few minutes; why I would be only too willing to give you whole hours. In fact, if the devotion of a lifetime—well, no, I won't. You'll say that's all bosh; and maybe it is. Go ahead. You can count on On Deck Harry, and you know it."

"I suppose that I do. I'll tell you briefly, for I have not time to waste. I'm not going to place it on the ground of self-interest, and all that, either, but, just as you say, for my sake."

"I know what you have come to Git Thar for; and I know, too, that you are being drawn into other matters that will not work in the same connection. You are not the man to fail those who have trusted you; and if you don't you may do a great deal of harm to me and mine. You know something; but you have not accumulated all the earth in the way of knowledge. Your smattering may be just enough to keep me from finishing out what I have in hand, unless some one goes for you to kill, and that I don't want."

"Thank you, my child, thank you. I am perfectly willing to take your advice in all things unless some one puts up a heap of coin as an offset. I won't meddle with the Spread Eagle, and I'll allow my pard to go on a gallop to his destruction—if you'll tell me who I am, who are my employers, and what I came here for. I thought I was Harry Harper, full, chuck-up, with sport, and running my own table; but it seems I'm only a capper, after all. Explain, and then command life itself."

"Oh, your mock heroics cannot put me off. I knew you the other night, the moment I saw you. I wanted to make sure, so I had Goodman introduce you. You are a detective—with a dozen names perhaps—but I have seen you in this guise before. You are here in search of a man, and your clews point out that man to be Major Sunshine. When his men carried you away I doubted if you would ever be seen again, for he knew you were on his trail."

"That's what he explained," answered Harper, cheerfully. "He said he was going to bang me, moreover. Not at all his fault that he didn't; but lack of opportunity. I simply skipped."

"And showed that he had not been mistaken by beginning to lay wires to retake you. You're all wrong, young man, you are all wrong. The chances are that your partner will drop within the next few days. If it happens, it is his own fault—I cannot prevent it, and I shall not try—but I want to save you. So do others. Can't you meet us half-way?"

"Do you know I suspected something of the kind all along? If you had talked that way when I offered to play your game for you, you could have had me just where you wanted me. I don't know where you loaded up with the idea

that I was a detective, after anybody at all in general, or Sunshine in particular—"

"Not after last night, at the cabin of the waifs?"

"Oh, you're onto that, too? Well, I'm called On Deck Harry, and I usually travel on cards. When one game don't pay I try another. I was about on my uppers, and a pard staked me to play his game. I'm doing it for all that's in it. If Sunshine gets in the way, it's his misfortune and not my fault. If it wasn't for that you wouldn't find me prowling around among the tombs."

"What then are you doing it for anyhow?"

"Because I'm paid for it!"

"And if I paid you for it you wouldn't go to the country to take care of a little game for me?"

"Couldn't think of it—till this bank goes broke."

"Enough. You are a dangerous man to have here, so I'll take you in!"

Two figures arose at his back, and Alda Bang held a pair of revolvers level with his breast.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE WRONG WOMAN.

WHEN a thing was said at the Pay Dirt it was about the same as though it was said to all Git Thar. News spread from there as fast, almost, as a telegraph could carry it, and anything that Colonel Starbiddle said there went as though on wires.

The colonel had not been absent an hour, and the majority of the frequenters of the place were still about when he returned.

He came with a rush, too, and as he darted in, with a speed that contrasted strangely with the usual deliberation of his movements, the half dozen who noted his entrance were prepared for something out of the usual order. Short of breath from his run, he stood for a moment without speaking.

He could not have devised a better plan to attract attention. There were enough present who would drink in every word he might say; and for the rest—they knew that something had happened.

"Take your time, kunnel, an' say it slow. We're all a-lissenin'," said the nearest of the sympathizers. "Don't you be afraid thet you won't find Git Thar yer solid frien's ef suthin's happened. What am she?"

"There's no time to talk now. I'll give you the fact first, and the points as we go along. I want a dozen good men, that have nerve and can shoot, to chip in with my boys that will be on the trail. The two youngsters at the Forks have been stolen away by some one who don't mean them any good. I propose to bring the children back, and hang the man that took them. Will Git Thar stand with me?"

"Every time!" was the emphatic answer, given in half a dozen shapes.

"Thar can't be no monkeyin' 'round them. Pick yer men, an' ther rest'll go 'long. Who done it?"

"Thank you, boys. I knew you would feel like that, for my sake, if not on their account. Wish I could answer your question; but I can't. We'll have to take the trail, I guess—some of my men are following it on foot now; while the rest bring up horses. I am going to make a cast myself, on a venture; but if I have been mistaken, as perhaps I have, I'll join you all not much later."

"Who yer s'picion? Out with it. Maybe we'd all better go 'long; you don't often git throwed off; an' we want ter be thar. Jest name his name."

"No, no. This is too serious a matter to sling around mere suspicions. All I can say is that the youngsters are gone, and the darkies were too scared to tell much more about it than that they were carried away."

He could not complain of any lack of volunteers, for the room stepped solidly forward.

"Thank you, boys. I knew that I could count on Git Thar coming to the rescue. We're all interested in this thing, and we'll follow it to the end."

"An' we'll kerry a rope along, with a runnin' noose. When we git thar we'll use it!"

"That's so! Fo'wa'ds, boys! Thar ain't no time ter lose."

"Are you goin' ter show ther way, kunnel?"

Such exclamations as these came from a dozen mouths, while as many more only handled their weapons and looked on in a silence that was more expressive than ever so much outcry.

"I want five men with me, at the most. Very likely my trail will run into yours. If it don't five will be as many as I can use. If we all go up the flume, revenge us if you ever get the chance. Where are my five men; all with good mounts, and ready to start now?"

"Right hyar you be. Me an' my pards fill ther bill. We've struck sich trash afore, an' know how ter handle 'em. Take us all, fur we're used ter workin' tergether."

"Good enough, Johnson. I couldn't have asked for better men, and it saves me the trouble of picking. Meet me at the Miners' Rest in two minutes by the clock. There's no time to lose. And the rest of you can take hold at once."

Ned Black can show you where he left Peters, and it won't be hard to follow him. He'll leave sign."

He did not wait for an answer, but took his departure at once; and simultaneously there was an emptying of the Pay Dirt.

Under other circumstances Starbiddle might have found some trouble in getting away from the crowd; but as he had made it clear that he was going the longest way around on a very off chance, the boys rather preferred to take the nearest route to the spot from whence the waifs had been spirited away. It is hard to make the average man believe that he will not see something of interest if he can only find the scene of any important event.

It was a very short two minutes that the colonel took to reach the Miners' Rest; but he found his horse waiting for him, and the boy who held him also had his Winchester over his shoulder. By the time that Starbiddle had tumbled into the saddle, Ben Johnson and his pards came tearing up on horseback, and then the six men swept away together. Such a cleaning out of the camp had not been seen since the place was founded.

"Now, kunnel, talk quick, an' say jist what yer want us ter do," said Johnson, sharply, as he rode by the colonel's side.

"You've played it very fine on them, and got everybody outer ther way, but thar's no tellin' how soon they'll come roamin' back. They may let Peters lead 'em off on a blind trail; but it's just as likely they may find out ther true inwardness."

"Why, confound you! You don't seem to believe what I've told you. It was the biggest beat of my life. Thare's another hand in the game, and I'd give five hundred to know whose. I must have the girl back, and I won't begrudge a thousand if the boys find her."

"Then you don't know whar she's gone to?" said Johnson, evidently surprised.

"Ef thar's that much money goin', an' ye'r in dead earnest, mebbe we'd better be with the other gang."

"Don't talk nonsense. Things can't all stop to find her. There are enough on the trail, and all in dead earnest. I want you for something else. You'll go out of town on horseback, flying; but you'll come back on foot. With everybody else out of camp I guess it will be hard to keep track of you till we join in the chase, later on."

"Anyway at all," answered Johnson, resignedly.

His pards said nothing. They were men who did as they were told, and asked no questions.

The colonel was in haste. He had several matters to provide for, and it was his intention to join the men who were searching for the waifs at the very earliest practicable moment. Before doing that it was necessary to see Gray Hawk, and acquaint him with his latest scheme; and if he did not use haste it might be hard to tell when to look for the man. At present it was likely that he was at the Blue Jay.

He was not mistaken in this idea. A sharp ride brought them to the opening to the mine, and a man was there on guard as usual, who halted them as they approached with a promptness that showed how well the watch was kept.

"Is Gray Hawk here?" asked the colonel, hurriedly.

"Hyar he am. Come in a bit ago, in a heap ov a hurry. Shill I call him out?"

"Yes, and tell him to bring a man or two with him. They must get to work right away."

"Jest wait, an' I'll hev him hyar in a jiffy."

Leaving the colonel to take care of the entrance to the shaft the guard disappeared.

In a very few moments he came back, followed by two men.

"I was afraid I might be too late to catch you. Some one else has been after the children—and, by heavens, they've got them, too. Don't make any mistake when you hear the story."

"I've got pretty much all the camp out on the hunt, and there couldn't be a better time to get your work in at Black Moll's. By the way, is there any news from the Spread Eagle?"

"Nothin' ter hurt. They're all thar, an' work's goin' on. Jim scouted 'round an' heard a whiff ov what a couple war talkin' ov. They're workin' through an old drift, what's caved in, an' they think they're nigh ter done. What they look fur when they git thar they didn't say. Mebbe you know. It's all right 'bout the kids. I won't be botherin' over whar they gone to; but if the town's empty it's 'bout time fur us ter git ter work. I ain't layin' out ter be fooled, an' so I sot Hapoy Hank ter watchin'. When she gits hold he'll let me know, an' then I'll be thar."

"And you are sure that you can run this matter?"

The colonel did not attempt to explain again. Gray Hawk might think what he chose. He was going into a line of work that would take him in another direction.

"Jest ez sure ez I kin be ov anything. Tomorrow mornin' I'll be back an' let yer know how things worked. So long. Ez yer say, there's no time ter spar."

"Go ahead; but take Jimsey with you, and as soon as you get away with the luggage send

word here, so that I can act. Perhaps you had better stay with it."

"Jimsey it is, and he'll let yer know in less than an hour that the baggage are packed."

Gray Hawk went his way, without asking what was to be done by those who remained behind. That was not his circus, and he did not care to know. For a certain consideration he and a couple more were willing to risk their necks or their brains. They had good backing; but even Git Thar might rouse up against all kidnappers if there was too much of it going on.

The little band approached Black Moll's house cautiously; and met with the man who had been watching, some little time before they reached the spot where Pius Pete had taken his station the night before.

"It's all right. She's gone in ez ef she was tired ter death, an' ef she ever sleeps she'll be snorin' in half an hour. Better give her that much time, an' then wade in. Ef you kin ketch ther weasel asleep it'll make ther job more easier."

"All right. There's nothin' pressin', onless sum'un sees us a-snoopin' 'round; an' if they knows us then I'll be 'way off. We kin wait."

From the spot where they took position it was not hard to keep up a watch upon the house.

No one went in, or came out. There was no gleam of light to be seen anywhere, and everything silent there, and elsewhere.

The little town at their backs was quiet—wonderfully quiet for the place. Between those that were searching for the waifs, those that were with Starbiddle, and those that were out on their own affairs, the streets were deserted, and the city as silent as the grave.

"Guess it's time ter sail in. Go keerful now. I dunno fur sure what we're goin' ter find. It may be she's alone, an' it may be that she ain't. Thar musn't be any foolin' with ther firearms onless it can't be helped; but if thar is, nobody must git away."

It was no very pleasant task to make an entrance. Gray Hawk and his pards were nomen to be afraid of an equal number in front of them; but to go into the darkness of a strange house where some one might be waiting for them with a revolver, that was a different thing.

However, Gray Hawk was an expert at house breaking, and was a man who had taken chances before. He approached a window, used a little crowbar judiciously, gave a whispered order or two, and then was inside. He had in five minutes, accomplished what the rest of them would have been half an hour about, and not done half so quietly.

Two men followed him in through the window. They knew just about where they were. The sleeper, if sleeper she was, occupied the next room, the door of which was just at the right.

The door opened easily at the first trial, and they entered the darkness of a curtained room.

Gray Hawk listened intently.

From one corner he could hear low but long-drawn, regular breathing. He settled the mask down over his face, produced a sponge from his pocket, and stole nearer. He did not care to run any risks until the last minute.

The last minute arrived—when he felt the bedstead touching his knees. He gave a low "hist," and at once the light of a lantern, held by one of the men, flashed across the face of the sleeper, upon whose nostrils the sponge was firmly thrust, even while, with his other hand, he sought to confine her wrists.

With a start and a struggle the woman awoke, and her one free hand dropped like a flash to a revolver under her pillow.

She was lying there, all dressed, as she had thrown herself down; and there was something unfamiliar about her, to the man who knew Black Moll well enough by sight.

"Holy blazes!" exclaimed Gray Hawk, "we've corraled ther wrong woman!"

And as he spoke the report of her revolver echoed through the cabin.

CHAPTER XXII.

SHADOWS ON THE HILL.

"ENTIRELY unnecessary," said Harper coldly, as Akla Bang's revolvers covered his heart.

"I hear a rustle and a click behind me, and I see a brace of sixes held dead level in front. From that I judge that I have been fooled on you, and that my pards have gone back on me to boot. After that I have nothing more to say. Up go my hands. Work your will. Maybe there will be a picnic when I get through this scrape; but I won't remark, I won't remark. I'm even with all the rest of the world except Sunshine and them; wait and see what providence brings me."

"Strict honesty to my friends would, perhaps, require me not to undeceive you," answered Akla, eying him sharply.

"But it's not my nature to lay up unmerited punishment for a couple of poor devils, who have done the best they could. When you have been so arranged as to be able to do no harm, I

will allow you a good look at the two men behind you, to convince you how much you have been mistaken. After that I propose that you move away quietly, and I will place you where no harm can come to you, or no good either, except to be out of the range of temptation for the next ten days. By that time maybe you will be willing to settle down on the trail of John Hungerford. There will be no other opening left."

"Thanks for the prospect. If you are undertaking all the contract that your speech implies, I have no doubt but that the whole thing will be done up brown. But just now—what are you going to do with me? Of course I am not going to kick as there are six deadly weapons aimed fairly at me. But if the time comes that I have half a chance, look out! I am gentle as a June wind just now; but I have heard of a cyclone striking out of a clear sky, and twisting up all creation. Maybe you'd better finish the job while you're at it, for the sake of all concerned."

"Don't be so bitter, please—"

"Bitter! I don't know the meaning of the word. Don't you see the smile in my face and the twinkle in my eye? I'm taking it all in like a little angel."

"On tin wheels, as Eli would say. Perhaps, by the time it is all done and over, you may think I had your interest more in view than you can see now. I might even have been willing to trust your word; but after what you have said, I am sure you will excuse me if I relieve you of your revolvers."

"Take them right along. I'm not touchy about such things, as some fools are. I don't need them now, and I'll know just where to look for them when I do."

"You are suspiciously willing; but so much the better. I will not be deceived. Of course you understand that, at the first motion toward anything crooked, away you go. I am not taking any chances such as you might. Permit me."

"Certainly—certainly. Help yourself. They are nothing to brag on—only some every-day tools that I picked up when I left Sunshine. I hope you can do better for me when we dissolve our temporary partnership; if not, I shall make no reflections. By the way, perhaps you can tell me what became of the instruments I left in the coach the other night. Lame Charley made no return of them at the Rest, as missing property found on the trip."

"Don't trouble yourself. If you ever need them again, I can tell you where they are to be found. Now, if you go quietly, you will save yourself trouble and me the necessity of harshness. You can have your choice at any time. Go with them, and run things or be run, just as you elect. It may be there will be more work than you think for—work that you will itch to have a hand in. When that time comes, give them your word to be true to their employer while the skirmish lasts, and they will turn you loose. You will at least be reasonable!"

"Certainly. I'll try it on a while. I am willing to walk any distance under a mile, or ride as far as the next man; but I'll be banged if I walk while he rides! I'll also behave myself like a returning prodigal—till I see my chance to get away; then I'll go, regardless. That's my platform; understand it to suit yourself."

"Perfectly satisfactory it is. Now, I have no objections to your hearing my orders. You are to treat him as well as he will allow, but you are to take him in, dead or alive. If it looks at any time as though he was going to get away, don't be squeamish—shoot him! That is all. I think he will give you no trouble. Go!"

"We understand, then, that it's fa'r an' squar' biz, an' that you ain't got no sneakin' kindness fur him? Kase ef you hev, I'd advise you ter moderfy them orders a leetle. We'll do jest w'ot yer say, an' don't wanter hear any wailin' ef we bring in er corpse."

"Just what I say—yes! There is no nonsense behind it. The man is personally a stranger to me. I have no reason why I should care whether he dies or lives. Again I say, go!"

"Go she are, an' thar's no takin' over. Good-by."

Harper had a good chance to examine the two men, and he was somewhat surprised and more pleased to see that they were both strangers. It had been particularly trying to his temper that he had allowed himself to be taken in by such a device—or rather, that he had deliberately thrust himself into it.

A schoolboy ought to have known better than to run such risks; but the fact was, he had trusted to there being no collusion between the woman and Billy Barker and his friend, and had thought he was playing the one against the other.

"Which shows that you can't 'most always sometimes tell," he thought, sadly.

"But what in blazes has become of them? They didn't look like men who would run away, and when they saw me being taken into camp, why didn't they chip? They must have seen the little circus, and they're not the sort to be afraid of two men and a woman, with me to help them. It's no use. They went back on me."

"For why?"

Trying to solve this momentous question he marched along between the two, as peaceable as a lamb, never looking back until the last moment that he could obtain a view of the spot. Then he gave a quick glance over his shoulder.

Alda Bang stood just where he had left her, her arms folded, her head bent forward as though in thought.

Considerably within the mile he had agreed to walk the pedestrian part of his journey came to an end. A man was waiting, with four saddled horses.

"Boss, you heard the orders. We want ter treat yer white, but we can't stan' no foolishness. Hyar's a hoss, an' you kin have a comfortable time if yer wants it. Thar'll be a leadin' string, so don't fool yer self 'bout gettin' away. An' thar'll be two men behind thet kin shoot to ther bigness ov a pea. Ef they see yer tryin' ter perform any monkey shines, they'll all both put a forty-four caliber right in ther small ov yer back. That hurts. Now, does yer want ter go along thet way, er will yer hev it t'other? You're ther doctor."

"Oh, have it your way, boys, have it your way. I tell you gospel truth, and straight as a string. I want to go clean to the end, and see what this thing is all about."

"You'll find out," retorted the man with a laugh.

Then the arrangements were made. One of the horses was lightly tethered to another by a leading line. On Deck Harry was mounted and a rope was adjusted, one end to his waist the other to the pommel of his saddle, to prevent his throwing himself off by a sudden movement to take his chances for escape, the three men mounted, and the little cavalcade pushed on.

Git Thar lay perhaps a mile behind them, yet on the still night air, sounds were borne to their ears that showed there was some unwonted commotion in the camp. Of course On Deck Harry did not know it, but the noise was made by the people as they started out on the trail of the kidnappers who had abducted the waifs. Had they known of the other work that had been done, would there have been more excitement?

Scarcely. Men at Git Thar had to look out for themselves, unless they had big money to pay for the doing of it by others!

In spite of that it was hardly in the nature of the camp to go back on a pard. It was a little strange that Billy Barker and Pius Pete had not shown up in the hour of need. Yet they had their reasons.

"Good ernuf, pard, that lets us out," whispered Pius Pete, as the two sunk down out of sight.

"We 'greed ter come ter ther berryin ground, but we didn't say nothin' 'bout goin' back. He's sed, stay out—I reckon we'll stay tell we see what this 'mounts to."

"And we just agreed to back the game of Alda Bang if she turned up. If I'm not clean mistaken that's she now. Them two fur it. Let's see what they're after. Neither wants to count us in—so much the better fer us, we're free footed and can figger it out to suit ourselves."

"An' say, pard, mebbe we kin find out what he's reely after. A man like him don't come ter Git Thar fer nothin' but fun, mebbe he's after—well—us."

"Not aware, Petey, that I've been a-doing anything ter make him hunt me."

"Me nuther; but there are sum fools in ther world."

"Dry up, then, an' we'll try an' see ef them's two ov 'em right in sight. Don't understand what he wanted us out ov ther road fur. He might have asked us ter stand back; but fur why didn't he want her to see us? He has his reasons; an' I'd like ter know 'em."

All this was said in a whisper, as Harper strolled forward. They watched the meeting of the two, though the distance was too great to note the expression of their faces, or catch the first syllable of what they were saying.

"We're too fur off fur any good," whispered Peto. "Ef we can't inch up closter we may ez well give it up an' crawl inter Git Thar ther back way."

"Don't be too brash about crawlin' up, Petey. He's a keerness cuss, an' kin pitch a pewter keerd just whar he wants it ter go. He might shove it at you."

"I kin make it ef you don't keer ter try. Stay hyar, while I try it on. Guess I kin tell yer more ov what's goin' on than you did erbout Black Moll, t'other night."

It was a pretty fair hit, and as he spoke he chuckled and then looked around.

Then he started.

"Heavens! pard! Yer see that?"

"What? I see nothing strange."

"Yander. That man. He's—he's ther man ez hez bin workin' roots. I'll hev one shot at him fur good luck."

Following the direction of Petey's finger Barker caught sight of a man, hurrying away.

The distance was too great for even extraordinary pistol shooting, and Pius Pete who had already cocked his revolver, seemed somewhat recalled to common sense at the touch on his arm.

"Ye'r' right, pard. It's too fur, an' I ain't throwin' away any chances on him. But I've got my eyes on him; you bet I don't let go this time tell I bring him. So long. I'll meet yer at the Pay Dirt, bymeby."

Before Billy Barker could frame words to hinder, the man was crawling away, with his step as noiseless as an Indian's, and his eyes ever fixed on the shadow in the distance.

"Very good," muttered Barker. "I'm as well satisfied. Now I'll attend to this interview; and perhaps I'll have a word to say to both before it is over."

He waited until Pete had got fairly out of ear-shot, and then cautiously moved toward the two, who were still conversing in the careless undertone that so provokingly escaped his ears.

Before he had gone half a dozen yards he became conscious that there were still other, and new actors on the scene.

He saw the two men creeping up in the rear of On Deck Harry, heard the words that sounded like a signal, and the sharp clicking of revolvers that followed. If he wanted to show himself a man of sand, and a friend to Harper, he had the chance to do so.

He did nothing of the kind.

He only watched what followed with a keenness that allowed nothing to escape him; smiling grimly to himself when he saw the prisoner allow himself to be led away.

"A bag of wind, after all. A heap big reputation; but nothing to back him when it comes to the test. Wonder what she thinks of him?"

The prisoner and his guards moved away; Alda Bang remained where they left her. She caught the last glance Harper gave over his shoulder, and smiled as she turned around.

In doing so she came face to face with Billy Barker, who rose like a specter from the ground.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE ADVANTAGE OF BEING A WITCH.

THE advantages of preparation were on the side of the man, but of the two Billy Barker looked if anything the more excited at this sudden meeting.

Neither drew any weapons and neither tried to turn aside. For a moment they just stood and looked at each other.

Then it was that Barker spoke, in a low tone. "I had hoped that I would find it all a mistake, but it is true. I find you here, and so—"

"My dear young man, if it gives you any particular sorrow, it is certainly of your own seeking. If you had not looked for me you surely would not have found me. Of course, it is a little awkward; but I am not one to harbor malice. If you positively wish forgiveness, all you have to do is to beg my pardon and retire. Once well out of the place, and I assure you that I will forget your existence within twenty-four hours. I had done so for months, until I discovered that you were a citizen of this very wicked burg. Perhaps the location suits you, but I had given you credit for being at least a trifle better than the average of Git Thar. What drove you to this sanctuary? Have you killed a man, or a dozen? Did you wreck a bank? Is there any crime you have committed in or out of the decalogue, that makes a residence elsewhere impossible? If so, you have my warmest sympathy; but meantime, it is very provoking. I have no use for you here."

"I do not quite understand," retorted Barker, thoughtfully.

"I heard that you were here, and for a month I have been waiting for you. Where have you been? What is your object in coming now?"

"Don't you know that I am a veritable will-o'-the-wisp? When you looked for me, of course I was not here. When you had given me up altogether, lo! and behold! I meet you. Now, what do you want? I have no time for any nonsense. Speak quickly, and name your intentions."

"Can you doubt me? I want an explanation, for one thing. The rest of the world would be very uncharitable if it knew of the mystery in your disappearance, but I kept it to myself. Why did you not trust me, and, as I desired, remain at home until I had time to devote myself to your service? How does it come that I find you here, and in this company? Do not be too proud to speak. All not forgotten can be forgiven."

"Thanks for your generous kindness, though I have not asked for either. At present I have not time for such nonsense. I am dealing with the sober realities of life. Come to me a month or two later and we will discuss the subject."

"Meantime you proposed to forget that you are—"

"Your promised wife. Don't be afraid to mention the fact, since I am not. I annul the contract, if circumstances have not done so already."

"Circumstances never can. Only your own word, and my death."

"It must be so. I do not wish to see you hanged, yet if you are obstinate, who can tell. If I went to the Pay Dirt and explained the position of affairs, circumstances might annul it before morning, and no questions asked. There is a certain rude chivalry here that will do and dare a great deal for the softer sex. And perhaps you have observed that I am not altogether

alone and powerless. If you have been spying upon my actions you may have seen that I have the ability to remove one who makes himself obnoxious. Accept the hint and retire."

"Alda, I am afraid that you are insane. How can I be in your way? how can I be obnoxious to you? I have been searching for you; but it was not to do you harm, or even to interfere with your search. Since you have found your way hither, I even admit that perhaps I was altogether in the wrong. Yet you must confess that I had some reason for the opinions that I unguardedly expressed. It was for your own good that I attempted to hold you back from the search you were determined to make in person. I said then it was a wild one; but your being here seems to point my error. Give me your confidence, tell me what you have done, and leave me to finish your work. We each, perhaps, knew too little of the other; but of one thing be sure, I have never doubted the honesty of your purpose."

"Thanks for your late confidence. I had indeed forgotten other duties for the moment, but your cold unbelief in them brought me to my senses. When I have completed my mission I may then, if you are still in the humor for it, for my own satisfaction and gratification, tell you all. You may see that a woman's wits are as keen as those of the world—keener—and that her instincts are worth more than all of your cold judgment."

"Why not now, why not now?"

"Because I am not ready for it. I have given you fair warning, but so that there can be no mistake I repeat it. Let me be. Cease to watch for me. Say nothing, do nothing that may interfere. In that way you can at least be no more to me than a stranger. Otherwise I will hold you to the line I have marked out for those I consider my foes. What that may mean I leave you to your own senses to find out. Is it to be peace or war?"

"There can never be war between you and me, Alda."

"And I say that there can and will be—even death if needs be! Will you leave me alone, and pledge your word that you will keep silent about all that you have seen and said to-night? It is life or death that you are choosing. Speak, and speak quickly."

"You are mistaken," he reiterated. "Even now you need a friend. Perhaps in another day it may be too late to aid you if I would. Let it be as you say, however. We part again as strangers. When you need me call for me and I will come. I may know more of this than you think."

"Thank you very much. I know, outside of your business, that you are a slave to your word, and I trust you accordingly. Farewell, I must go now. If we never meet again, at least you will understand that it was a sacred duty that led me away from you, and that if I did not perform it, at least I died trying. Farewell."

He held forth his arms toward her but she did not notice the gesture. She simply waved him back. He looked after her mournfully, and she glided away. He had asked her no questions about On Deck Harry, yet he had recognized the little sport, and would have been more than mortal if he had not wondered why he had been carried away.

She doubtless had her own thoughts. She would have been less than a woman if she had not a thousand questions, the answers to which she would have been glad to hear. How he came there, what he believed, what he would do, what she must do—all these things came into her mind just when she cared least to consider them. She shrugged her shoulders.

"Perhaps it would be well to disappear once more; at all events I can judge by what he does now what I can expect. If he follows me I must provide accordingly. But he must know that come what may I could not harm him."

Billy Barker did not follow her. He stood where she had left him, wondering how she had drifted into her strange position, how she came to have men at her beck who were willing to murder if need be, how it would end. After she had gone some little distance and there were no signs of pursuit, she turned her steps directly toward Black Moll's, and entered like one who belonged there.

For some little time her step had been slower, and there was a tired look on her face.

"I should arrange matters now," she thought, and yet she flung herself upon the bed.

"A few moments rest I must have. Then—"

And while thinking, or trying to think of what she would do then, she fell asleep.

It did not seem to her that she had more than closed her eyes when there was a clutch on her wrist, a hand pressed upon her face.

She struggled, strove to scream, involuntarily caught at the revolver beneath her pillow, and fired at random.

By chance the bullet found its mark, since it dashed the lantern from the hands of the man that held it; otherwise it did no help nor harm.

"Strike a light thar, an' hustle 'round quick. Ef Black Moll's hyar you'll hear her shoutin' ef yer gives her time. An' when she shouts she does it bad. Curses on this fool! she squirms

like a mad cat. I s'pose we'll hev ter take her 'long, too, but it's no more ner I figgered on when I took ther job. Who in the bitter waves ov brimstun' be she?"

He caught the other wrist before there was time to discharge the revolver again, and wrenched the weapon from her fingers, once more applying the drug to her nostrils. Once reckless of noise or struggle and he could handle the woman as though she were a child.

The men at his back obeyed his orders without delay. A lamp was lighted. Though it momentarily increased the risk to them it was a necessity if they wanted to make a search of the house in case Black Moll did not appear of her own accord.

There was not much ground to go over. Two rooms, a closet, a garret: these were hastily searched, without discovering a sign of any one in hiding.

No one seemed to suspect the existence of a cellar. The floor was examined, but it was in a superficial way; and even keener eyes than theirs might easily have failed to see evidences of the closely-fitting trap.

"Hyar, what you fellers waitin' fur, in thar? Yer goin' ter take all night? Anybody plugged?"

Jimsey had thrust his head in through the open window, and hearing the muttering of Gray Hawk and his pards was slinging in conundrums that elicited a volley of oaths as a preliminary answer.

"Why, blame your sneakin' souls, she's not hyar! While we war roustin' 'round in ther dark she's slipped out an' gone ter raise ther camp, er ther Spread Eagle, an' you never seem ter hev seen her go. What d'yer think yer war out thar fur?"

Alda had succumbed to the influences of the drug, lying motionless, though Gray Hawk had knotted her wrists together as a matter of precaution. He left her and came forward with his hand upon his revolver. Plainly it would not need much urging to cause him to vent his disappointment on Jimsey's head.

"Nary woman passed us," the latter responded, hastily. "Ef she ain't thar we jist come when she wa'n't at home. But what in blazes war yer shootin' fur?"

"D'yer take us fur blankety blank fools? That's what's ther matter. It war at us. We brung ther shuter, but, it war ther wrong woman that we tackled."

"Ye'r sure?"

"Fer rocks!"

"What's ter be did?" Cut her throat, an' we'll clear out. Ther boss wants Black Moll, an' ef he can't git her he ain't wantin' any thing else in ther same line ov goods. Thar's bin a big mistake somewhar; an' I'm afraid we'll hear ov it."

"An' killin' this hyar lamb ain't goin' ter make it no better. It's my idear we'd better be takin' her 'long. W'ot's ter hinder it's bein' Moll, herself?"

Gray Hawk uttered a hard, contemptuous laugh, and held up the lamp.

"Looks like ther ole witch, don't it, eh?"

"Ef she's a witch how yer goin' ter tell how she looks? It's all ther calico thet's hyar. I second Jimsey's idear."

"Thar's suthin' in that, sure ez yer live. Ther boss can't no more ner howl. Thar's no more ter be did hyar; we'll jist try an' wring her in on him fur w'ot she's w'ith. Ef that don't suit him he kin do his own dirty work. Jimsey, you kin tell him how it lays, an' that ef it ain't Moll it's some 'un next door to her an' mebbe jist ez good. Thar ain't no good ter wait hyar. It's gittin' on toward mornin' an' we'd better be gittin' under kiver. Thar might be some mistake made ef Git Thar'd happen ter drop an eye on us."

"Ef it does, kill the gal an' take ter the bresh. That's my advice. I'm off fur head-quarters."

Jimsey was not more desirous than the rest to leave the spot. They hesitated no longer, but taking Alda with them they left Git Thar behind and started on their journey, the leader muttering:

"Jimsey may be right; but ef she's a witch, sure an certain, I wouldn't wonder ef we war in fur a mighty uncomfortable time. I'd give a lead dollar ter know w'ot's comin' next."

The question was heard by a man who returned no audible answer, though he chuckled to himself:

"Eli, mebbe. Kerry 'em off. Kerry 'em all off, an' that'll leave room fur Eli ter git thar. I've a pard on ther way that's kickin' now, but he'll give you a hustle when he drops to this little game."

CHAPTER XXIV.

ON DECK HARRY HAS LIGHT FINGERS.

THE precautions taken to prevent the escape of On Deck Harry really seemed like so much labor thrown away. He went along, the most willing captive that ever was.

Conversation was at a discount, but occasionally he hummed to himself snatches from some familiar tune, or whistled softly. He was alone with three men who, as likely as not meant to murder him; and yet he did not notice their presence, much less was he troubled by it. As they did not speak to him there was

not much danger of any conversation being started.

There was no effort at all made to bewilder him as to the route. It was entirely unfamiliar, since his explorations hitherto had been confined to the other side of the town; and he was allowed to take it in to his heart's content.

For a time their course led along a regular trail, and progress was rapid. Then it branched off, gradually going into the rougher ground to the right.

The man who rode by Harper's side must have been well acquainted with the way or he could never have plunged on through the darkness so confidently. There was a network of little gulches, leading higher and higher into the mountains in the background. When they emerged from one of them it was to push on over a wood crowned knoll.

"It's the mountains again—I feel it in my bones. Wonder if Colonel Carden is going to be around again, or if Traveling Eli will show up to the rescue. If I had any say-so I'd vow that this was some of Sunshine's band, coming for me to get even, confound them! if they had treated me square in the start there wouldn't have been any call for after-claps. All right. Before they get through they'll find that, as usual, I am all on deck. As for the little lady who goes to supper as Governor Bang's daughter—maybe she is that same, and maybe she's not. Before I get back from this jaunt to the country, I hope to know a heap more about that, as well as some other things, including the history and mystery of John Price, detective. But I wonder if anybody, in their sober, honest senses, think Harry Harper can be held for ten days, and be not willing? If so, the fools are not all dead yet."

He said this to himself as he leaned forward in his saddle, and strove to pierce with his sight the black wall that seemed to rise up in front of him. It was more than likely that the journey neared its end.

He was right, although they clambered on for nearly an hour, the horses seeming to know the road as well as the men.

Once or twice the horsemen were bunched closely together, and all the time the one who acted as leader kept a sharp watch upon the prisoner.

A glimmer of light that showed itself at last marked their destination.

"We're thar, Mister Man. You've bin actin' very squar', and mebbe butter won't melt in yer mouth; but you take a friend's advice, an' don't go ter puttin' on no frills. You heared what ther lady said. Hold yer hush an' you'll come out jaybird. But ef Castle Rock ain't good enough, an' you go ter showin' off with men thet's p'raps ez good ez you be, thar'll be a lead shaft through yer corporosity too quick ter make yer sick. You jist lissen ter that fur yer own good."

"When I put on any frills, my friend, there's always a funeral of the other fellow a few minutes later. You men have treated me about as white as I could have expected, considering your kind, and I'd hate to have to put any of you to sleep for good; but if the time comes when it ought to be done, don't forget that I'll do it first, argue about it afterward. I'm a fool for giving you warning, but I was always that kind when I had a chance."

"Ef you want ter keep on ther good side sich blowin' ain't ther thing ter do it. You may be a good man, an' all that, when yer hev a chance, but we ain't givin' any chances."

"You look in your belts and then look in mine. I don't suppose you're fools enough to be lugging around empty guns, and if I couldn't have scooped in the whole gang while I was talking to you, and been ready for your pards here, I want to know. Come, now, let's run things comfortable together. It's not very long till morning, and I'd like to have things settled and get a little sleep. How is it, pards? Peace or war?"

They had turned around a corner of rocks and come fairly into the glare of a fire that was burning in a niche, though there was no one, at first glance, visible near or around it. As he finished speaking, Harry threw one leg over the pommel of his saddle—the rope that had apparently bound him to it dropping away—and he sat, with his arms folded, facing the three, while in his belt, the butts not two inches from his fingers, on either side, hung two revolvers.

"It's just as you want it, gentlemen, but I tell you, the first move toward a weapon and the circus opens."

"By ther holy Rockies! Ther galoot's ez good ez he sez. He's went through us fur a pa'r ov tools, an' we ain't knowed it. Hold on, stranger. There's no hurry. We kin talk it over an' see what we kin make ov it. Ef you begun ther racket on us, ther rest ov ther boys would be hyar with ther guns, an' you'd go outen ther wet. Ef ye'r open ter reason, mebbe ther hull thing kin be fixed."

"Oh, I'm not a bit bloodthirsty, and I'm the most reasonable man you ever saw; but I don't want to take too many chances. This thing has got to be fixed now, and we can talk it over after awhile."

"But how yer goin' to fix it? You ain't

trustin' us, an' I'll sw'ar I don't keer ter reesk too much on you."

"Well, I'm in no hurry to change my quarters if the grub is even fair to middling. Suppose you jist consider me a visitor for the next twenty-four hours, and treat me accordingly. I've been wanting to go somewhere and rest. It's a low-lived fact that, except for a couple hours' snooze I got at Sunshine's headquarters the other night, when he had me tied up, I haven't had a square sleep in about a fortnight. You can set up a feed and after that show me a corner. It's safe to gamble on it that you won't hear from me again to-day. Only, one thing remember, I'm a light sleeper, and it's mighty dangerous to wake me in a hurry. I sleep with the patent pill dispensatory convenient, and if even a mouse runs my way I am apt to open up the distribution. Honestly, that's your best hold. What do you say?"

The offer was a singular one, if it was made in good faith, as it seemed to be; but the three men were inclined to listen to his appeal to hear reason. They spoke to each other in a low tone before the leader answered:

"It's ther bed-rock truth we bin givin' yer. We don't want ter do you any harm. Ez fur ez orders goes now, we'd turn yer loose some day not fur along. All we want are ter keep yer outen mischief. Ef you'll peromise ter stay by us hyar, an' not try ter leave tell we gits things put back jist in ther shape they be now, blame ef we don't trust yer."

"And how about the other fellows?"

"Which other fellers?"

"The ones here that I've not seen yet."

"Oh, thar's on'y one of 'em, an' he ain't hyar yit. I'll peromise fur him. Ef he don't think ez I do, thar'll be blood on ther floor, an' don't yer furgit it!"

"Good enough. Somebody put my horse away. I won't want him again till I go back to town."

He slid off of the animal and glided up to the fire, which, in the cool of the breaking morning, could not help but feel grateful.

As he did so, a grunt reached his ears, and glancing downward, he saw the man who had evidently been tending the fire, sleeping like a log.

"That settles it," he said, lightly.

"Ef that's the kind of watch you keep here, you're not such desperate bad men, and you actually need me to keep your eyes open a bit. Maybe you folks don't know it, but there's heavy chances that there'll be a regular flood tide of fun in these regions shortly. Maybe the boss knew what she was about when she sent me here to be on hand, when the worry begins. Hello, Sam, asleep, as usual? Wake up. I'm as hungry as a bear jist out of winter quarters. Rustle around and get something to take the edge off with. I know you're good at that, if you haven't lost your old-time cunning."

He stirred the sleeper carelessly with his foot, and the man bounded up, staring about him in a bewildered manner.

His gaze fell, not on the three men, who were watching him curiously; but upon Harry Harper.

The sight more than confused him.

"Hello! Who in—yes. It's you? Whar did you come from?"

"It's I, Samuel, sure enough, jist come into camp with your friends, to stay awhile. Hustle up some grub first and we'll talk over old times afterwards. By all the rules of border logic, you should have had your throat cut long ago."

"Oh, no. Sammy's still round, an' he'll hev the feed out in no time. I'm gladder ter see yer than ef I'd struck a pocket."

The three men quietly led away the horses. After a brief absence they returned and threw themselves down by the fire, watching in silence the brisk way in which Sam was preparing the breakfast.

"Ef it had been jist us he wouldn't 'a' rustled 'round so lively," whispered one, at length.

"You bet not."

"Knows him of old, Eh, Billy?"

"That's ther way it looks."

"An' fur a real bad man."

"Yer hits ther size fu'st clatter."

"Then, don't it kinder strike you that mebbe, if it comes to ary foolishness er frolic, thet he's got us?"

"You kin have him if yer wants him, I don't."

"What's comin', anyway?"

"Can't prove it by me. A he ole circus mebbe, 'ith trimmin's throwed in."

"That's it, an' this gerloot kin lead ther orkestry. He'll be thar."

CHAPTER XXV.

THE HISTORY OF JOHN HUNGERFORD.

PIUS PETE never gave a second glance behind him, when he had once started on the trail of the man he had seen skulking in the distance. He had enough to do to get on that trail, for tho' he tried to keep his eyes fixed upon the flitting figure, in some way it vanished from view before he had gone fifty yards.

"Right thar it was," he muttered, a little

later. "My eyesight can't have fooled me, but he's gone now, an' I don't see no way of tellin' which way he went. It's all about alike, an' him nowhar. It's too dark now to ketch on to a foot track. I might ez well not throwed off on Billy."

Yet, in spite of this conclusion, he kept steadily on, his glances darting to the right and to the left.

When he saw him, the man of whom he was in pursuit was walking very deliberately, so that it was not likely that he was far from the spot, and if he was in hiding nothing could be gained by undue haste.

As Pete wanted to approach unseen it was necessary to proceed with caution, even though the chances were that the man was already aware of his presence.

For these reasons the progress of Pius Pete was necessarily slow and unsatisfactory, and in fifteen minutes he found nothing, and had not got far away from the spot whence he started. When he had about decided to give up the quest, and was turning his face toward Git Thar, he heard a step behind him.

"Hold on, Petey. I don't suppose it's worth while to caution you for all the harm you'd be likely to do; but it's Billy Barker that's coming. Don't shoot."

"Jest in time you are. I hed that man on me brain, an' I mout'a gone in fur sudden death 'thout stoppin' ter consider. I've lost him sure, an' thar's no ust ter fool more time over him. What war ther upshot over yonder intervoo? I ain't heared no reports, an' I guess thar war more fuss an' feathers than real work."

Pete did not notice the slight put on his capabilities with the pistol. He was hardly aware of what he was saying, his eyes still roaming around in search of his man.

"It had a queer ending, Petey, a very queer ending. I'd give something worth while to know what it all meant."

"Put it thar, pard. Put it right thar—that same leetle suthin' nice. Ef Pius Pete can't give yer ther bearin's ov ther rifle it won't be no use ter try ter make it. I know er heap more ner yer think fur."

"I wonder ef you don't. For half a cent I'd make a clean breast. There's no one else in Git Thar that I would care to speak to, and a man sometimes feels as though he must talk or die."

"That's ther time yer don't want ter say much, pard. It's 'bout 'long that hour in ther day thet yer most apt ter make a fool ov yerself. Ef you kin git a wooden man—a deaf an' dumb man thet's lost his eyes are next best—an' hev him erlone in ther corner ov a dark cellar, an' gently whisper in his year, mebbe thar won't be so much damedge did. Otherwise, at them times, yer allers sez preactly what you'd give a dollar fur ter hev back ther next day. But ef yer wants ter talk, I'm hyar to listen."

"You wouldn't make much of a lawyer, Pete, if you held on to that platform. But sometimes I suspect that you know more than you let on. You're a better man than you seem to be, and maybe if your story was fitted to mine the two would run into each other without much show of where they joined. Did you ever hear of John Hungerford?"

"See hyar, Billy, what yer givin' me, now? How did you ever hear anything ov him?"

"That's so, pards. Them's a conunjurum thet Travelin' Eli'd like ter hear answered moreover."

Pete wheeled toward the sound with an oath, and Billy Barker started. Within a few yards, and just where they would have sworn that there was no one a moment before, a man was lying, his head resting on his hand.

"Are you ther gerloot I've been tryin' ter git a shot at fur skulkin' round me and my pard? I don't like ter fire at a onepertected man; but ef so, it ain't too late yit. What yer doin' hyar?"

"Waitin' ter hear w'ot you've got ter say 'bout John Hungerford."

"Don't you know that when I ketch onto a skulker I pull trigger?"

"An' hit nothin'. Didn't yer try it on me two or three times t'other night? I'm hyar yit, though. Ef yer wants ter pull ag'in, sail in; but what's that got ter do with John Hungerford?"

"Maybe, ef I war tryin' ter hold level I wouldn't go ez fur 'off ez you think.—Han's on ther board, now; an' then p'raps I kin talk. Honest Injun, what yer want ter know 'bout Hungerford fur? It's bin years sence I heard that name."

"Acause I hate him."

"Good ernuf, pard. Play fair, an' put it thar. Ef yer say so we kin chip tergether. Jest go on with yer story. What's ther man by ther name ov Hungerford bin doin' to yer?"

"I dunno ez I'm called on ter expound. I'm a-huntin' ov him, an' he don't seem ter be no friend ov yours. Ef your a-huntin' him too, why can't we all ante up tergether, an' ther biggest hand take ther pot?"

"Who's goin' ter say w'ich hand are ther biggest? Mebbe I come frum whar they play straights, an' yer hail frum a camp whar they bar royals."

"Let Billy be ther refferee, then. W'ot he says'll go, eh?"

"That's hearty, pard, tho' it's askin' a heap. Ef I ain't mistook you're a sorter 'tective, tryin' ter run down ther king-pin ov road-agents—Sunshine. Ef that's so whar does Hungerford kin in a?"

"Mebbe, I ain't sayin' that Sunshine don't come in incidental like—ef I war sure he war ther right man. I've got a kinder pard, now—he's jest dead-bent on takin' him in—but somehow he don't fit onter ther story. He kin play his hand on; but ef another keard comes up fur trumps, I'll foller ther lead."

"Oh, dog-gone yer keards, an' yer trumps, an' yer Sunshine! Let's hear the Hungerford yarn if there is one. We ain't time ter fool. Thar's fun bin goin' on in Git Thar an' we're missin' ther hull uv it, sounds as though ther town war bein' turned inside out."

"Ther town kin keep," said Eli coldly. "It's too late ter worry, an' we'll know all erbout it in ther mornin'. Lemme see how ther yarn goes."

"Thar war once a man, name ov Duffey, married a widder. That's 'bout ez fur back ez it's w'uth while ter go."

"War she a widder?" asked Pete, quite comfortably. He had settled himself to hear, and looked as though he intended to enjoy the revelations that were to come.

"She sed so: an' she hed one kid, a teeny chit ov a girl, ez war a kind ov er certifikate ov w'ot she sed. Thar mout' hev bin better women, an' thar mout' hev bin wuss; but she hed a mighty rough time at Sawnose Bar, fur Duffey war a horror frum 'way back. When she took ther kid an' sloped Tom didn't get much sympathy frum ther neighbors. Fact are, they war talkin' 'bout hangin' him, an' while he war skulkin' in ther mount'ins she took ther advantage an' lit out."

"Ther scene changes. A man knowed ez Kunnel Carden took charge ov ther widder an' ther kid. Jest why I dunno, but I kin s'picion purty plain. She war nigh onter half-dead, an' didn't hev much ter say. He an' his pard were runnin' a mine tergether, an' each ov 'em hed a cent'rest in severial other holes."

"Somewhar among 'em they hed made a strike. Whar it war an' what it war I didn't jest hear, but I reckon it war about ther biggest pocket ov nigh onter solid ore that war ever struck 'round hyar."

"One time when his pard war away, an' ther most ov ther men war away, ther bad men frum ther mount'ins kin down an' went fur him an' his pocket."

"It wa'n't much use. They roasted his sister alive, and tortured him, but they didn't find whar he hed cached ther plunder. They hed him strung up by ther neck, an' war shoutin' an' a-shootin', an' him jest a-lyin', when his pard kin back. He waltzed inter that gang all by hisself alone, an' cleaned it out slick ez a loon on a mill-pond, cuttin' Carden down with his revolver ez he war et ther las' gasp. When he got 'em on ther jump he kep' 'em a-goin' tell he'd cleaned ther cabin, an' then come back an' found he war too late. Carden hed skipped an' took ther kid 'long with him."

"Jest in time ter save 'em both? It's 'bout half lie an' half truth—nigher to the real thing than sich yarns gin'rally git. It war his pard ez led ther outlaws, it war his pard ez held ther woman up to ther coals, it war his pard, John Hungerford, ez put ther rope 'round his neck; an' when he found he wouldn't weaken went away an' left him fur dead."

So Pius Pete broke in hotly.

"It war John Hungerford ez did all that, but it war'n't his pard, by a durned sight; fur ther fu'st letter of his name war Eugene."

In a matter-of-fact way Travelin' Eli advanced this proposition, but as well as he could in the shadows of night he was eying the other keenly.

"That's a lie," said Pius Pete, doggedly. "Thar never warn't no two men that much alike, even ef they war brothers."

"Sorry ter disserp'int yer, Peter; but ef I pulled when you gimme ther lie you'd bin a shootin' off that derringer in yer pocket, an' whar'd I bin. Travelin' Eli ain't a fool. Ther next best thing ter shootin' in sich a case are ter show that yer tellin' ther truth. Ef ther two warn't brothers they war cousins; an' ef I ain't wide off thet's both livin' ter this day."

"Mebbe you kin tell me w'ich one are Kunnel Sunshine, now."

"Wal, I've had my doubts 'bout that, but I got it down fine at last, an' it's Eugene sure ernuf; but that's no sign ov a duck's nest."

"It's a heap big sign, ef it's ther same gang. Yer couldn't fool a sick kiote 'ith sich a yarn."

"Wal, that's ther way I looked at it at fu'st, an' I war full bent on rakin' him in; but sence I've bin lookin' 'round I begins ter think suthin' else. He's a new man on ther road, on'y bin workin' it a short time. Mebbe some ov ther old gang made ther same mistake; took him for ther old boss, an' axed him ter lead 'em on ter vict'ry. I got one big, he-ole reason fur so thinkin', w'ich can't be rubbed out, nohow."

"An' what's that?"

"Ther rigger, John bez got onter the cache

ag'in, an' he's livin' right thar, in Git Thar, now. Ef he don't git that pocket yit it'll be acause I rake him in."

CHAPTER XXVI.

TRAVELIN' ELI'S GROUND FLOOR.

BILLY BARKER, sitting a little back, listened to the two men. He had not interfered in the conversation, but he had been an interested listener. Now, with a tone of conviction that startled at least one of his hearers, he exclaimed:

"By heavens! you've got that thing down fine. I can't help whether Petey believes it or not. I do. And I'll bet big money that the last letter of that man's name is Starbiddle. I've not been watching him for nothing."

"Oh, say, pards, go slow. You'll break me all up," muttered Pete. "Don't I know Star? An' wouldn't I hev caught on ter any sich game?"

"Come, now, Petey, don't you know that Starbiddle is after the Spread Eagle? For why? He don't blind in that sort ov a game onless ther deck are stacked aforehand an' he knows what keards are comin' out."

"I can't b'leve it, ner I won't; I ain't a nat'ral born fool."

"Ef I'd thort you war I wouldn't be tellin' yer all this. Ther fact are that when yer go ter rakin' up ther past ov men out hyar it's apt ter make a queer mix. Ther are so many things they've bin keepin' shady on. Carden didn't know ez his pard hed bin married, an' war a skipper from ther East fur the s'posed killin' ov his wife. An' you kin bet yer bottom dollar ez he didn't dream that ther leetle chick he war nussin' fer his sister's wa'n't no kith ner kin ter him, but war Gene Hungerford's darter. Such is life, an' it takes a mighty sharp 'tective ter straighten out sich lanks ez them. Now, when it turns up, years arterwards, thet John Hungerford did ther killin', an' is wanted bad fur other bits ov irreg'lar operashuns thet hed bin heretefore saddled on ther scapegoat, Gene, what der yer make ov it all?"

"Ef that's true Gospel, I'd make out ez it war a condemned pity ez a man sh'ud git mixed up with a gang like Sunshine's just when ther clouds war beginnin' ter roll by. Now, mebbe yer kin tell me what that same Carden hed bin doin'. War he a goat among ther lam's, er a lam' among ther goats?"

"I ain't so sure ov that, but kinder tigger on it's bein' betwixt an' between. 'Thout hevin' caught on peractly to ther figness of ther affair, I sh'd say thar war a right smart ov lookin' fur him, an' ef he'd show hisself up, an' tell a clean story, things mout' be made all straight, speshully ef he had his half ov thet big kerrel. Now, I've g'in yer a purty long story; what yer sayin' back ag'in?"

"Nothin', pard," answered Pete, in a subdued tone. "You knows it all."

"Well, hang me, then, ef I wouldn't like ter know what yer' cappin' in with Starbiddle fur, an' what yer' goin' ter do about it now? Money talks, an' ef yer think yer outen ther woods yit yer' way off yer base."

"Not ter say thet Black Moll an' Gene Hungerford, as yer calls him, er Walter Gruel, as he used ter be, er Major Sunshine, as he are now, hev struck up a pardnership ter snatch ther bonanza on ther halves. Ef Moll reaches it first, well an' good; he'll see her out. An' ef Starbiddle gits thar ahead, Sunshine are ter be ready ter hold him up. Betwixt a road-agent an' a witch, what'll be left fer ther proper heirs?"

"You, too, Billy! Consarn it! what yer talkin' at me fur? D'yer think I'm Carden?"

"Now yer talkin'. I sh'd smile."

"Petey, we've arrived at the conclusion by different roads, but it's all the same fact. Colonel Carden you were, and if there ever was a bonanza that you hid away when Hungerford went fer your ranch, now's the time to be lookin' out. There's three gangs after it, and they've all of them got the points down more or less fine. If you want a solid friend or two to tie to, now's your chance. Speak up while we're listening. All I ask fer my share is a turn at John Hungerford's necktie; I'm even willing to share him with Eli here, but banded if I want to work for a man who won't trust his own friends."

"Pards, I say it ag'in, yer' way off. I'm Pius Pete, big on ther shute an' large on ther drink. All w'ot yer bin sayin' ter me are so much Dutch. Ef Starbiddle are that kinder a man, in course I don't want ter hev too much ter do with him; but he's allers treated me white, an' I can't hardly b'lieve it yit. It's easy ter say a lot ov things, but it's a heap diff'rent ter prove 'em."

"Then I've bin a-wastin' vallyble time. An' while we're a-talkin' Star bez bin kerryin' off ther waifs, an' got Aldy Bang in a heap bad snarl. I wouldn't wonder ef he hed ther cache by to-morrow mornin' an' war lightin' out fer Mexico ez fast ez boss-flesh c'ud kerry him. All right. Ef you can't help I'll throw up the sponge. I can't buck ag'in Git Thar alone."

"An' w'ot's Star goin' ter do with sich truck ez them?" asked Pete, with a snort of disgust. "You must hev him on ther brain bad. Ef he's after thet cache yer bin y'armin' over. Ez ain't got time ter run ther hull earth."

"No, but thar's a wrinkle er two thet he's willin' ter try on. Ef Aldy Bang war Kunnel Carden's *real* darter she mou't be ther only livin' heir ter thet bonanza, an' ez sich it'd be handy ter hev her outen ther way fer good an' keeps. An' ef Sy hez a buth-mark on her shoulder, an' John Hungerford war goin' back ter pass fur Gene, an' rake in thet good little half million ez are waitin' back thar fur her, it mou't be ez well ter hev her along. He's hed that Duffey a tellin' ov her a yarn a'ready ez makes her b'leve most anything, an' when he goes back a leetle furdur, an' tells her w'ot he sez are ther true inwardness, ez she can't see, an' Star hez allers bin more ner kind to her, she'll swaller it down like spring water."

"Say, you. Who's Aldy Bang? Whar did she come from, an' what's she got ter do with ther mix?"

Pete showed a renewed interest at the mention of that name.

"I'll never tell ef you don't know. You've hed yer chance, now I'll take mine. I wouldn't say nothin' to Star 'bout this, fur he might think yer know too much. Cholery are ketchin', an' I wouldn't even advise ter molkey 'round a case ov measles. So long, you fellers, an' don't say Travelin' Eli didn't give yer a chance ter kim in on ther ground floor. We'll see who's mistaken in ther long run."

The two did not attempt to answer, or yet to detain him. All that Pete said was:

"So long, pard. You may mean well, but yer can't think ter ring thet rigmarole in on us. When yer see us ag'in try futhin' fresh an' easy. You 'tectives sling fur Jack too reckless. Ef yer kept yer eye out fur game all ther time yer wouldn't waste so many keards. Git Thar would be a bad place fur you ef they found yer out, but we'll never tell. That's all."

Yet when Eli had gone so far that his form seemed just about to vanish in the distance, and he could not by any possibility hear, Billy Barker's fingers closed on Pius Pete's arm with a nervous clutch, as he hissed into his ear:

"Say, old man, I wouldn't want to give it away to him, anyhow; but don't make the mistake of your lifetime. Is there any truth in what he's been saying? If there is it's time that you and I were acting. To-morrow morning, even, may be too late. Will you stand by me?"

"Look hyar, Billy, you saved my life good ernuf! I ain't furgittin'. Ef ye'r askin' me ter break with Starbiddle, jest bekase thet gerloot hez bin feedin' us wind that's purty steep. Ef I didn't think he hed a game behind it, I'd say he war plum, stark, starin' crazy. But ef you kin show me ary sense in it, outside ov what he sez, blamed ef I don't stay by yer tell ther cow's horns drop off, if it bu'sts me an' star wide open. But what you got ter do with it?"

"I'm bound to believe you, old man, and I'll open up clear down to bed-rock. I've had my eye on Colonel Starbiddle ever since I have been here; I know that Alda Bang is here, mixed up in this affair; and Alda Bang is my promised wife."

Pete uttered a low whistle.

"It's so. I needn't try to play off on you any more. There was a time I thought as you do; and was willing to risk my life's happiness on the belief. Since I have come here I think otherwise, and what that detective told us to-night has opened the whole thing up in my mind. Only one puzzle is there left. Unless he was very sure of you, why did he speak at all? Can a man so keen make one such great mistake?"

"That man ain't no 'tective at all. He war feedin' us on wind ter fatten to his puppose. I can't quite see through it all, but I'm skirmushin' purty brisk 'round ther edges, an' I wouldn't wonder ef I war holdin' fur him yit afore ther cirkiss are out. Now drap that an' talk sense. If there are a Aldy Bang, an' she's goin' ter be yer wife, and yer do keer fur her, an' yer think she's in danger, yer better be lookin' round fur her—an' Petey 'll go right erlong."

"Thanks, a thousand thanks, old man. Somehow I've been trusting you all the while, and I'll depend on you now. You are wrong, I think. That man is a sleuth of the law, and he has not come here without a reason. If he says Alda is in danger, though I do not understand it all, I believe him. She has good backing, but she may be too reckless for her own safety. I must know if she is safe or in danger."

"An' whar'll you find her?"

"What Eli said has given me a clew. She must be in with the woman who claims the Spread Eagle. We will go to her cabin and see."

"What excuse yer goin' ter give?"

"None at all. If she is to be my wife—and I doubt if she will deny it, none is necessary. I will ask after her, and if need be, tell what she is to me. Perhaps Jane Hetherington knows."

"An' ef she's missin'?"

"Then I'll ask her of Colonel Starbiddle. I can't go wrong on that. If he is the villain I believe, he will know where to find her; and a revolver can bring him to his bearings."

"That's ther way ter talk it. You go fur Aldy Bang, an' Petey an' his revolvers 'll go along. We've lost a heap sight of time hyar;

but then we've heard a lot ov chin-chin thet may be worth ther tellin'. Both tergether, Billy; an' ef ary soul in Git Thar bez dared ter talk cross-ways ter ther gal, p'int him out, an' Pius Pete an' his revolvers 'll all be 'round."

CHAPTER XXVII.

ALL CATS ARE GRAY IN THE DARK.

It was understood that Jimsey was to report at once, and he would have picked that part of the service out as his choice when the expedition started. The dubious result changed all that.

He would rather have been hurrying down the southern trail, and taking the chances of pursuit, than to be going to Colonel Starbiddle to announce what more and more looked to him like failure.

"It war ther best we c'd do," he muttered to himself. "We war ter kill ef arybody else chipped in; but this war a case not pervided fur. Mebbe he'll want her killed; an' mebbe he won't. This way he'll hev ther chance ter give a solid pointer on what he wants, an' ther boys won't be blamed fur a blame bad mistake w'ot hez no curin'. I kin ketch 'em in an hour an' tell 'em w'ot's ther wrinkle. It's jest ez easy, an' won't make half ez much muss ter finish ther job on ther road. An' ef she's w'uth ther holdin', they kin go 'long down."

With which philosophical conclusion he journeyed back to the colonel, who was waiting for him with poorly suppressed impatience.

"I could have sunk a shaft there and back again in the time you've taken. You must think I want to stay here till all Git Thar comes back from the chase. What's the result?"

"Fair ter middlin', boss. 'Bout what yer mou't expect. Fired at ther pigeon an' hit ther crow. Ther boys a-watchin' war fooled, an' when Hawkey sailed Black Moll warn't thar; but they caught onto a likely young heifer. It war oncertain whether ter slice her throttle an' set ther trap ag'in, er take her 'long down. Ter avoid a muss on ther floor they drewed off, an' 'll take keer of her till you send 'em word. Under ther cirkimstances it war ther best we c'd do. Will that go, er shell I take a couple ov ther boys an' try it ag'in?"

Colonel Starbiddle swore softly, after his usual manner when mentally distressed, and his feelings were almost too deep for utterance, but after a few moments of exercise, he returned directly to the subject.

"A girl, you say?"

"Leastwise she war a mighty young woman. An' monstrous good-lookin'."

"Who was she? how did she get into the camp without any one being the wiser? Is that what I pay eyes and ears for? I might as well ask a blind man to look out for me. Who knew that there was a stranger of that stamp in camp? If none of you did, what are you all good for? There'll be a settlin'-up some of these days that won't be so pleasant."

"Well, boss, I dunno how she got hyar, an' I dunno that any of ther crowd seen her afore, but I jest s'picion that I've heard her name. I war goin' ter ax questions 'bout her, but biz war so lively that I clean furgot it."

"In the fiend's name, go ahead, then, and say what you know. Don't waste time; it's worth dollars just now."

"I overheard that stranger ez they call On Deck Harry axin' arter a bit ov caliker that war on ther stage with him, ez he said war comin' through ter Git Thar. She didn't arrove, an' I thort it war queer, but thar's bin so much dodgin' 'round, an' playin' hide-an'-go-ketch'um, thet I thort it mou't only be wind. He didn't seem to know much 'bout her, anyway."

"What was she coming here for? what was her name? To know that much might kill or keep just now."

"He wouldn't be sayin' much 'bout what she war comin' fur. Ef he knowed he'd want ter keep it ter hisself; an' if he didn't, he couldn't; but he said it war Bang—Alda Bang, er some sich outlandish name—Guv'ner Bang's darter. An' he axed who Guv'ner Bang war, an' that war a sticker; but it 'pears he called at Git Thar, ever so many year ago, lookin' fur a pard, an' they scooped him. He's up thar in ther bone-yard, waitin' fur ther horn. Ef he ain't thar, he's very dead, anyhow."

When the colonel heard the name of Bang, he started as though it was a loud report; and then listened with eagerness to the end.

"Bang? Alda Bang? Ah, I scent the kernel of the mystery. Why didn't you speak up sooner? But for a little hog-luck I'd have lost the whole inwardness. Alda Bang. I see it now. I thought there was something strange about this Jane Hetherington. You've hit it, Jimsey, you've hit it. I can see through the thing from A to izzard. The rifle is as good as made."

"Glad ter hear it's all serene; but I tell yer, ther boys thought strong ov shovin' her corpus in a corner an' waitin' fur ther sure-ernuf Moll ter come. They'd bin apt ter did it. Bein' ez thar war some shootin', they war afeard some 'un might turn up. Then I slung it in thet, ez Moll war a witch, how war they ter know thet this warn't she? Looks don't go with them cattle."

"You hit it closer than you thought—I'll stake a million on it! And we'll know how it is

before very long. Let them go. The thing works just right. I'll risk a heap on it, anyhow. Do you think any one saw you going or coming, near enough to the house to mix you up with what has been done there?"

"Not er soul."

"Come on, then. We'll take another look through Black Moll's ranch, and see if we don't find some pointers that will make your hair stand. And perhaps—but there's time enough to lay out for getting into the Spread Eagle after we see what we can find."

"Jest so yer don't find that double-bar'l shot-gum, 'ith Moll behind it. She slings 'em nasty when she gits ther chance. Yer mind how she took Bob Whaler? Not any sich in mine. Oh, no!"

Starbiddle knew his man, and said nothing. Jimsey was cautious to the last moment, but when in a corner could be relied on. He preferred him to men who bragged more beforehand, and were reckless till they ran. The two started for Black Moll's together.

"Hyar you are," said Jimsey, halting at the window. "Yer kin bet yer last slug she ain't got back yit, er she'd 'a' shut ther winder an' opened ther door. Maybe you'd better crawl in an' leave me ter watch cut. I don't see none ov ther boys about, an' I guess they got tired an' went home."

"Don't trouble yourself about watching. It's safe that there will be no one here before morning, and I want to have you lead the way. You know the lay of the land."

"Hyar goes, then," answered Jimsey, and he crawled lightly through the window.

The lamp was still burning, and by its light the colonel explored the place.

There were some few evidences of the slight struggle that had taken place, and a muttered curse fell from the lips of the colonel as he saw the remnants of the shattered lantern.

"And you call yourself a workman!" he exclaimed, pointing at them.

"A sleuth, on the track and coming across them, would never stop till he had traced them home."

"Cussed careless it war, but it wa'n't my leavin's. I didn't run things, er git inside; but I'll 'tend to it now. It's a pretty clean case thet thar ain't bin no one hyer since I left."

"There's no one to come," retorted Starbiddle.

"All Git Thar is chasing the men that got away with the youngsters, and Black Moll bas left for good. Don't you understand yet? Ah! Here is the proof I was looking for."

He held up the curtain that stretched across the alcove, and in one corner they could see the clothing ordinarily worn by Jane Hetherington.

"There's her disguise. I've been thinking all along there was something wrong about the witch, and now I know it."

"Then we got ther right critter?" said Jimsey, who did not require more than a hint to get at the apparent inwardness of the case. "An' so Black Moll ain't an old witch, arter all?"

"Witch enough, but not as old by one-half as we've all been placing her. Man alive, a mere girl has been matchin' her wits against ours, and very nearly made the play for half a million. There wasn't an hour to spare. Let me think. Will the game win? It's risky, but the very boldness is in its favor. Without her presence there they will scarcely dare to stay, and if I can escape detection for twenty four hours the game is made. By the living holies, I'll try it!"

"Try which?" asked Jimsey, who had been attentively listening.

"I've got to uncover my game a little, but what of that? You're a man that I can trust, and I swear to you that if I ever suspect you of bad faith I will kill you the next moment."

"Kill away, kunnel, I don't want er see ner bear nothin' but what's allsuar' an' reg'lar, an' I'm allers doin' ther same. When I ain't, let me know."

The colonel looked sharply at Jimsey. Evidently he was debating whether he could trust him to the extent he contemplated, and he muttered to himself:

"Why not? There's gold for him if he proves faithful, and lead for him if he don't. He ought to have sense enough to see which side the profit is on even if he is not square clean through."

"Jimsey, I'm going to let you into the wrinkle. If I ever find any one fly to it I'll know where the pointer came from. Stay here a moment. I'll see how the thing works."

The colonel drew back into the alcove and dropped the curtain, leaving Jimsey to puzzle his head over what particular scheme his worthy chief might have in mind.

The suspense was not for long. Starbiddle was more expert than one would suppose, and he wasted no time. He came out, and Jimsey was struck dumb. The colonel was there, and yet he was not there. Apparently he disappeared, and Black Moll had come back.

But if this was Starbiddle in disguise how had he managed to shrink his portly figure? Or had that been part of a previous disguise?

"It may be a desperate risk, Jimsey, but if it wins I'll boss the Spread Eagle and run the

Blue Jay, and have the whole thing dead to rights in less than fifty eight hours."

"D'yer think you kin git in, on that sort ov a lay? You look like ther clean white article; but they'll drop to it when they hear yer talk, er find you don't know ther way."

"Hardly," answered the colonel, in such a different tone that Jimsey almost lost his breath.

"I heard her talk a bit ago, and that's enough for me if they can tell the difference I want to know. Time is all I want, and time is what I must make somehow. If Peters strikes the lead and gets in his work I'll have Git Thar off its base, and then I can attend to the rest."

While he spoke it seemed as though luck was befriending him. A couple of men came running up, showing but little care or caution, and rapped hurriedly on the door.

At a wave of the hand Jimsey slunk back into the alcove, and the colonel, waiting only until he was out of sight, threw open the door.

"Sorry ter desturb yer," puffed one of the men, "but ther boys thought ther good news war wuth bring'in'. We're through ther old drift, ez fur ez it were caved in, and at ther other end hev reached a chamber. Ef that's what yer lookin' fur you can come an' see."

"Good," said the voice of Black Moll, from the lips of Colonel Starbiddle. "The end is very near now. Go back and tell them to rest. Perhaps it is the result coming after such long waiting, but I feel strangely weak. Guard the mine well to-day. Let no living soul not of us enter it."

"And—perhaps they may grow desperate. To-night at eight o'clock come for me. I will have something here to reward all hands. There will be a jollification in the Spread Eagle to-night, for one way or another I think the end is near at hand."

"Hurrah! That's the way ter talk it. Wish-in' ther strike may be ez big ez yer hope fur. I'll go back ter kerry the news. We'll make things howl fur good luck."

"Go now, and keep watch as I tell you. If you don't something will happen. You'll have to settle with me."

The men turned from the doorstep, and went away thoroughly deceived.

"Now!" exclaimed Starbiddle, "if I can find Syringia the game is all made. If there's no news at the Blue Jay I'll have to take the trail."

CHAPTER XXVIII. PETER'S PLOT.

THE expedition from Git Thar was in dead earnest. No nonsense was there about the men that started out to take the trail; and the kidnappers that fell into their hands would certainly be elected to fare but roughly. More than one carried suggestive ropes; and not a soul objected.

Is the first place, there were half a dozen or more of Starbiddle's men, who had their orders; and half a dozen more friends who would do as they did without asking questions.

Then there were twice as many men of Git Thar who went on the trail for just what appeared on the surface, and they were more dangerous than the rest because, while in their way they were just as "bad," they were honest, clean through in their present intentions.

Peters was perhaps the best guide that they could have had in all that region. He was an old prospector who had been over the ground thoroughly, both years ago, when the pan and rocker and the surface dirt were about all that were thought of, and in these later times when quartz and crushers were the fashion. He knew also where not to go; but of that they did not think. If they had heard the parting instructions of the colonel they might not have submitted so cheerfully to his dictation.

The little army that moved out from the town of course went immediately to the vicinity of the cabin of the waifs as a starting point, and it was not long before they overtook Peters, who was plodding along on foot, with dogged perseverance.

A cheer arose as he was recognized.

"Go slow, boys, an' don't git ahead of ther hearse. ef yer don't want ter spile ther health ov ther funeral," he exclaimed, waving them back as they rushed up.

"I've got things nigh onto a string, an' ef you'll give me 'bout fifteen minutes more I wouldn't wonder ef I hev it all down fine. But ef yer run over ther trail I'll shut up shop an' you may as well go home. It ain't all milk an' honey ter foller at night; an' there'll be a heap guess-work 'bout it anyhow."

"But have you made out who did the trick, and can you guess which way they are going to go?"

"Ef I wer ter say yes ter them questions I'd be lyin'; but ef yer asked c'd I guess right nigh down to the plain truth I'd say it, an' wouldn't be fur off when the checks are turned in an' the game closed."

"And who do you suspect?"

"Wal, boys, I don't want ter hang a dog fur havin' a bad name, but it's my idear that them road-agents ez hev bin sashayin' along ther trail, funder up to ther Fork, hev come in this way, an' are tryin' ter make a spec offen Git Thar."

"What! Sunshine?"

"That's 'bout ther ticket. He's hed an eye on this camp, an' knows they'd buck up han'some afore they'd 'low ary harm ter come to ther kids. Ef we don't find 'em thar'll be a man 'round 'fore long ter ax what we'll give ter ther gerloot ez does; an' he'll put ther figger high ernuff if we don't. Mebbe that'd be ther safest plan—ter wait till he comes. But I'll sw'ar, I hate ter hev Git Thar playel fer flats. How d'yer all shout?"

"Try 'em a hitch ter-night, anyhow. Ther, ain't no doubt but what we'll buck up han'some if we hev to; but I sez, try rope an' rifle fu'st—coin when notbin' else goes."

"You got that down close," was the general cry of the rest; and Peters saw that he had the crowd with him, and under pretty fair control.

"That's what I like ter hear. An' they say thar's five thousand dollars reward on Sunshine. Ef we snatch him in this leetle argym-nt we may be that much ahead. It'd make a neat leetle divvy, even in a crowd ez big ez this."

"Say, Peters, don't you know jest whar them road-agents hangs out?"

"You bet—ef reports be true: I'm fly ter ther back door, an' ther front door, an' ther inside an' ther outside. Oh, I knowed all that land ov hidin' places afore they war thort ov."

"Do yer think they know yer does?"

"Nary time."

"Then what do yer all say? We know ther chaintes are ten ter one, fer which way they're headin'. S'pose we drap all bother with ther trail, an' go in ter git thar ahead of 'em. We kin make a heap better time that way. Ef we git thar fu'st we kin take 'em on ther fly ez they come in. Ef we don't, it's dead sure we won't lose nothin' an' mebbe we kin git a whack at 'em afore they're expectin' us."

"Good fur Dandy!" exclaimed Peters.

"Jest what I war goin' ter say. We kin leave a couple ter stick to ther trail, an' ther rest kin pelt ahead. We'll hev ez much fun, an' a heap bigger chance."

"Then we're in fur it. Fix it that way an' sail in!"

"It's all toler'ble plain sailin' fur a bit. When they turn off, though, I'll start a couple ov yer ter foller an' ther rest kin go on. Thar'll be time saved, an' don't yer disremember."

Peters had his reasons for this proposal, and was delighted to see how everybody was playing into his hands.

For a mile or more he rode on at the head of the rescue party, without seeming to say much; but in that time he had managed to give a hint to the men that he wanted to be ready to leave the main body when the time came.

"Hyar's whar some on 'em branched off," he said, at length.

"Mebbe they all left, an' mebbe they didn't. Ef thar's ary man ez kin see more ner I kin let him chip. Ef not I'll start Dandy an' a couple more. They kin foller ez they find it, an' ef ther kunnel comes up, they kin explain whar ther rest ov us hev got to. You fellers pelt on ahead. Yer can't miss it, an' I'll ketch up long afore you git inter mischief."

The order was literally obeyed. The great majority went pelting on, while Peters and his picked men turned aside.

"When you fellers sees ther kunnel tell him he ain't goin' ter be bothered by no Sunshine this night, er to-morrer. Ef him an' his gang ain't took in ther best part ov Git Thar is stritched acrost ther road fur town, an' they can't come ef they want to. Now's his time."

"But ther gal; blame it, ther gal! What shell we tell him about her?"

"You whoop right back to him, mind yer, an' tell him he'll find ther gal at ther Spread Eagle. En ef she ain't thar she's bin thar; an' Black Moll'll know wharabouts she are. It's a purty game they tried ter play on us, an' it shows some 'un's bin listenin' er leakin'. Star'll onderstand it a heap better ner you do, an' ef he don't git in fine work on it I want ter know. P'raps, ef yer rustle 'round yer may git ther bulge on ther gang, an' kerry in ther kids yerselves. Ef yer do, you be mighty sure ther no one sees yer afore ther kunnel does. He hev his way ov doin' biz, an' it looks big ez though chis war makin' trumps ter suit his hands."

"Holy Abraham, what a game! Hedn't you better come in yerself? You'd know what ter do ef we should come across ther kids."

"I can't do it or I would. It'll be wuth big money ter git ther best part ov Git Thar away on a wild-goose chase an' more yit ter keep Sunshine out yonder. Ef I ain't thar it won't be did. You git down ter biz an' I'll steer ther boys ter kingdom come."

CHAPTER XXIX. STARBIDDLE'S SET-UP.

DANDY understood that he was to obey orders even if he broke owners, and when Peters went on to overtake the men of Git Thar, and lead them in the direction of the hiding-places of the outlaws, he started for camp without delay.

He had no intention of wasting time in endeavoring to find or rescue the waifs. For an even fight with desperadoes as great as himself he had no stomach, and when the chances were

that the odds were all the other way he wanted to avoid it altogether.

It was likely that the colonel would be just as thankful for the intelligence he had to give him as if he brought the waifs themselves. If he found signs on the way it was all right; but he did not mean to go out of his road to hunt them; and he did not intend to be seen by any outsiders, either.

When he got near to the camp he left the road that he had been following, and headed for the Blue Jay by a route which would avoid any of the cabins sparsely scattered around Git Thar.

He made good time; and yet it was near to morning as he came scurrying up to the Blue Jay.

By chance it was just when Starbiddle, having thrown aside his disguise and left the cabin of June Hetherington was hurrying to the mine to see if any intelligence from Peters had reached there.

"Good enough!" he exclaimed, as he recognized Dandy.

"Peters wouldn't have sent him back if there hadn't been news, and good news too. Speak up, old man. What's the latest from the seat of war?"

In a few words Dandy delivered the message as Peters had sent it.

"He's sure of that?"

"Sez he's jest ez sure ov that ez he is ov anything. He see'd ther sign whar they turned back. Ef it war Sunshine they'd gone straight on; an' there's no one else ter take a hand in but them two. Like ez not they're runnin' this thing in caboots; but ef they are, or ef they ain't, all ther same you'll find 'em in er about ther Spread Eagle."

"Then it's time to be at work. If I had known this three hours ago—but, no. I've got in other work that counts just as much, or more. If they're safe in the Spread Eagle I'll find them there when I get ready to take possession. Yet it would have been a big thing to have caught them on the road. Something might happen to lead Git Thar on the right trail, and to have the town nosing around there now would break everything all up."

"Don't you hurt yer-self 'bout that. Ef Peters can't hold 'em whar he wants 'em I'd want ter know. An' I ain't so sure they've got under kiver, ef they're really an' truly a strikin' fur ther mine."

"Man alive, they had a couple of hours' start on you."

"Yes, but I kin ez ther crow flies; an' they'll be windin' 'round, steppin' light so ez to leave no tracks, but sich ez pointed ther wrong way. Ef yer want 'em go fur 'em. Thar's a chance anyhow."

The conversation had taken but a few minutes and it had not been so eager on the part of Starbiddle. He was thinking while he spoke. Now he made up his mind, even as he looked around him.

"There's a chance in that anyway. It is sure that Spread Eagle and Sunshine are pulling together, and if they don't go one way they will the other. Maybe it would be the best hold to let Git Thar into the game. After such a hand they wouldn't back Black Moll. When she mixes in road-agents to buck against Starbiddle she gives away her chances. I could take them all in with a whoop."

"If I was sure I could make 'em see that the Spread Eagle belonged to me—and keep dark wnat followed after!"

"But you bunch your cards and you bunch your Jack, I'll play the hand as I dealt it. A moment, Dandy. It won't take much time to see what's in it; and if we win I'll have the inside track on the home stretch."

The colonel had his men well in hand, and leaving three or four to guard the Blue Jay he marshalled the rest, gave a few hasty instructions, as many cautions, and then led them silently away.

"There is just one chance," he thought to himself. "If they took the back track we can head them off at the 'gap' if they haven't got through yet."

The "gap" was a narrow and seldom used trail through the hills, and the very place for an ambuscade. It had all the natural advantages which such a purpose required, and there, if anywhere, such a thing would not be looked for since it was scarce a couple of miles from the home base.

They reached the spot the colonel had from the first selected in his mind, and a hasty examination showed that there had been no one over the trail that night.

"You understand, boys. If they see us, not a man must get away. If there does, the game is up and we'll have to start another one all fresh."

"Don't be skeered," whispered Jimsey, who of course was of the crowd.

"Thar's only four ov 'em an' they're all paid for. We kin afford ter be bold ez lions."

This was true for the present, if no mistake had been made about the men who had done the abducting. There was a good deal of guess-work, but it was from a fair starting-point.

One thing was certain, had the colonel only known it.

The waifs knew little if anything more about their captors than he did.

To Syringia the voices, as to Pet the forms, of the men were entirely unfamiliar.

The children had but scant knowledge of the lay of the land around the camp, and the treatment they had received had thoroughly confused them. They imagined they had been carried miles away. When they went creeping through the canyon toward the ambushade of the colonel they fancied they were half-way to Cactus Fork, entering the mountain fastnesses that they knew were there.

Just in the gray of the dawn outside, just as the shadows were deepest within the canyon, the leader, who held Syringia, suddenly drew rein. Perhaps it was for some slight, suspicious sound; perhaps from a cautiousness that came too late.

"Hands up thar! We hev ther dead medecin' on yer, an' ef yer move, risk er no risk, we'll drill yer."

Like a flash there came a pistol-shot, at the covert in which the challenger seemed to be lurking.

It was a mistake.

A bold rush instead might have carried them through, since a man, carrying one end of a lariat, was just darting across the trail, and the momentary hesitation gave time to complete the trap.

It gave time and chance for something more.

The flash gave a brief illumination of the scene, showing two men in advance, each holding some one or something on his saddle, while at an interval of a few yards came two others.

The flash showed that these two were safe game, and at once in answer came three or four shots from right abreast.

The two men went down, each with a sound that was between a grunt and a groan, while their horses, the one badly frightened, the other badly hurt, plunged madly forward just as the two leaders drove spurs into their steeds, and surged ahead, shooting as they went.

Then—there was a thundering, floundering crush, a cry, a fall; and men, horses, and the two waifs, were all mixed up in the struggling mass that lay upon the rope that had been stretched across the trail.

Colonel Starbiddle remained in hiding but his men rushed forward.

"Knock 'em in ther head, an' don't be too tender about doin' it!" said Jimsey.

"Ez long ez they don't see who's who it don't make so much differens; but ef they ketch on they've got ter go up ther flume."

It was hardly worth while to give the order; the operation was being performed as a matter of necessity, while other hands caught up the waifs and carried them away.

The fall had been no light one, and both of the children were insensible, though neither was badly hurt.

"Right into my hands again," said the colonel, as he bent over them. "Jimsey, you know the lay of the land better than the rest, and are not afraid to take a little risk when there is coin behind it. Take the girl, pick a pard, and find Gray Hawk. Keep both girls till I come; don't let them see each other, and I'll be along some time in the next twenty-four hours if all goes well. As for the boy, Johnson and I will bring him into Git Thar with flying colors, and I'll see how things are runnin' now. Off with you. I don't want the kids to see each other if they happen to get awake. I'll teach the young whelp his story by and by, when we get out of this; you hustle out, all but a couple to bury the corpses if needed. They mustn't be found for a couple of days. Folks at Git Thar might think I had been lying."

There was no hesitation about obeying orders. Syringia was beginning to stretch out her hands. Pet made a slight movement and uttered a low moan. When the girl fairly recovered she was riding on as before, and it was long before she understood the change that had been made.

As for Pet, the next thing he knew he could hear a familiar voice.

"He's coming 'round at last. I was afraid he was gone. How long has he been insensible? We must get him into town as soon as possible, and then I will go on the trail again. This time, though, they will make a straight break for their hiding-place, and there will be no trouble in running them to their holes, unless the boys have headed them off. Infernally unlucky that I couldn't keep them going when I had them on the run, or that I couldn't have dropped two horses instead of one."

In some such way as this the conversation went on around the boy; and bewildered as he was it seemed to him that he could see all happening just as he heard it.

"Sy?" he gasped. "Have they got her yet? Oh, save her and let me go."

He would have thrown himself out of Starbiddle's arms had he not been watching him.

"My poor boy," the colonel said, "that was hours ago. The others are all on the track, and never doubt but that they will bring her in. We feared you would die for a time, but I begin

to hope that you are not seriously injured. As soon as I can put you in a place of safety, where you can be looked after, I will go out again. You do not know of course, that over half the camp has been searching for you. Who was it that took you? Have you ever seen them before?"

"Never, never. Oh, poor Sy! If you could only have taken her and left me."

The colonel smiled to himself, and made no answer. This suited him a great deal better. It was a living excuse for his absence from the main body; and would account for his immediate disappearance. Things were working. He came into Git Thar in triumph, bringing Pet with him, and stopped at the Pay Dirt.

In five minutes everybody left in camp was there to hear the particulars. What they were the reader can guess from the outline already given.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE WAY THE COLONEL WORKED.

"Hit it again, old man; there's plenty of it, and it's my set-up to-night. But, Peter, keep your wits about you. I haven't been backing you up just for fun's sake, and if you've been stuffing me with wind you will find me a very bad man to get away with. When I want you I'll want you hard, and if I find you're not fit for business, or have been wandering too far from the truth about what you know of the inside of the old Spread Eagle, I shall sit down on you to hurt."

"I'm all thar when you say, sail in; an' ef I don't pan out ther pure quill you know what you kin do. I'm allers travelin' on my merits; an' fur truth I can't be beat. Wud' ther boys all call me Pius Pete if I wa'n't ther onaudul'trated extract ov truth, biled down? Jest git things on er string an' then send fur me. I'll be all thar."

Pete seemed inclined to take high moral grounds on the strength of the vague insinuations of Colonel Starbiddle. There was a good deal less said about shooting than was generally the case during his conversation. The colonel was known as an unhappy subject for a bluff game, and such Pete was never known to tackle when he had his wits about him.

"I am not saying that I doubt you at all; but I want you to understand that on general principles I trust no man, and that I am always ready for dead beats and bolters. I don't expect to find you either. It would hurt my heart if I did, because I like you, Peter, I sincerely like you, in spite of your little failings. As I don't generally give warning, you ought to feel flattered. Keep sober, and expect me to want you some time to-night. You were out of the way last night when I needed you, and I don't remember that you told me yet what you were doing. Perhaps it is just as well you were. It left that much chance that you wouldn't go racing over the country on a wild-goose chase. As you hadn't a hint of how soon the big strike might come off, it was, I suppose, just a piece of your hog luck."

"No use ter say that it wa'n't my fault. I jest froze on ter that bag ov wind, Travelin' Eli he's called whar he's known."

"He wanted me ter kin in ez a pard on a hole in ther ground what he reely showed ther papers fur, an' he axed a hull lot ov questions that I thort mentioned Sunshine. They don't put 'em up much sharper than they made him. He an' his pard 'll get over ther riffs ef yer gives them time, but they ain't my style at all. I'll stay out an' see ther fun. Major Sunshine ain't likely ter come inter camp unless he heza reason fur it; an' you'd die a-laffin' ef you heared ther plans they hev fur him."

"Clear as mud, Peter, but I understand that it is all right."

"I'll stay by yer tell ther last horn blows. After that it's time fer every man ter be lookin' after his own 'fairs."

"Correct, as usual. I gave you that as a feeler. Dandy will look after you, and when I whistle you come boiling. That's enough for the present. You go to the Blue Jay and stay there until some one tells you to go somewhere else. So long."

The colonel had not time to ask questions about Eli.

He understood that he and Harper had straggled away in the wake of the pursuing party, on the off chance of getting into the stronghold of the road-agents. As long as they were out of his way he did not care. Of the capture of On Deck Harry not a whisper had reached the camp.

As the colonel had seen Billy Barker deep in a game of draw with Andy Shehan, and as little worried about the missing waifs as he usually was about all mundane things that did not pertain to cards, he never thought to ask any questions in regard to him. If he had done so, it is a sad fact that the information elicited from the man of piety would have been more unreliable than usual, which is saying a great deal.

At all events, Starbiddle had Peter under surveillance, and having given his men such cautions and warnings as the case needed, he melted out of sight. Git Thar understood that he had gone to join the estimable citizens who were off

for a round-up on the road-agents, while his own men watched and waited for something in which they were a good deal more interested.

It was not a necessary part of the colonel's game that the greater part of the camp should be off on an expedition against Sunshine, but it fitted very neatly into the schemes he had on foot.

One advantage was, that there was not a living soul about to meet him as he secretly made his way to Jane Hetherington's cabin, some little time before the hour he had set for his visit to the Spread Eagle.

"I might get in and run things with less risk, but this plan came of itself; and hang me, if I don't carry it through to the end. It will keep the men bunched, and if the thing works they won't have half as hard a time. We may finish the work to-night, or we may have to shovel her men in a heap and get down to hard work; but sure as you live, if we get a foothold, we'll have all that's in it, if it's half a million."

It would seem as though the scheme of the colonel had but little chance of success; but he based his hopes on what he knew of the woman and her habits. His principal fear was that his ignorance of what had been done since, long ago, he had explored the recesses of the mine, might betray him. Pius Pete had, it is true, made some shrewd suggestions as to what he might find; but he did not care to pin his faith to mere surmises. They might have their value; but he wanted his revolvers ready to correct any error of judgment they might have caused.

He had kept a shrewd watch on this woman, and might have interfered sooner if she had not meantime been playing into his hands.

There were times when she was wandering around alone. There were other times when she had with her a guard or an escort—a man or two from the mine. It would not seem strange that she did not visit the Spread Eagle during the day—she frequently omitted doing that—and he had an excuse ready furnished for asking a man or two to come to the cabin that night.

At the rap on the door the man in disguise was ready as before. He had taken more pains with his appearance and looked more like Black Moll than ever.

"You have come, have you? Had I not needed you I would not have waited. What is the news from the mine?"

"Nothin' fresh. Ther boys left ther chamber ez they found it, an' went back to ther other drift. They do say ez they're on ther lead ag'in. I wouldn't swar. They're mighty anxious fur you ter git 'round. They say Starbiddle don't bluff wuth a cent, an' mebbe he's up ter suthin' extry deep. An' Iry sez I sh'd say thar war no news yet frum, you'll know who."

"That is all right, then. I have heard. Here are a couple of baskets to carry. If the men don't bless you over the right shoulder when you arrive you can bless me over the left. I care not for such things, but those that do can judge whether it is the right sort."

There was a dry humor in her tones that the men caught onto at once. They approached the baskets cheerfully, and raised them with a grin.

"Better ner a barrel, 'cause it's more likely ter be ther genooine thing, in glass. An' it won't be no trouble waitin' ter devide it 'round. Each man kin git his own sheer, right to once. Oh, ther boys 'll shout when yer ax 'em up ter that lay-out."

"I don't want them shouting too loud. There is business to be looked after as well as pleasure. I pay them well for the first, and want to throw a little of the other in, but they mustn't interfere. Now, forward march; and look out for danger as you go along."

"Thur ain't no gerloot ez kin git away with us when we kerry sich a load," laughed the men as they staggered out under the baskets, followed by the seeming woman wrapped and hidden in the folds of Black Moll's great cloak.

The colonel had purposely prolonged the conversation in order that he might give these men every chance to suspect. He had been certain that he could detect it if they did; and he was ready for them, with his derringers in his sleeves if they attempted any desperate measures.

But they did not. The light was uncertain, the disguise thorough, the imitation complete. Having these two on his side he was not afraid to enter the Spread Eagle. What he would do, once there, he had as yet told no one, but he had simply cautioned his men to be ready when he called for them—that there would then be work on foot.

The distance to the Spread Eagle was rapidly covered; the two joking with each other in a low tone; the colonel stalking silently behind them, just as he had once seen their true mistress doing. He had not watched her enough; but he had his eye on her oftener than she knew.

Coming alone there might have been some question of entering; this way there was none. He looked neither to the right nor to the left, but went straight into the drift.

Ira Joyce met him. It would have been a revelation to Git Thar if they had seen him.

He was no longer the slouchy-looking rough of the Pius Pete stripe. He evidently was in command there, and understood his business.

"We war lookin' fur you ter-day, but I guess you know yer own cues. Mebbe you've hearn suthin' ov how things turned out. Ther hull camp war startin' out fur ther kid when I left las' night, an' I didn't count on it's bein' good luck ter 'low anybody out ter-day. Ther boys might feel too good an' leak; an' I ain't a-keerin' ter meet any one tell this racket gits in shape."

"Right enough, right enough. And it will be in shape very soon. There will soon be millions in sight or all I have heard goes for nothing."

"So I reckon. But we've got ter keep an eye open fur breakers. Kunnul Star means biz. He's workin' frum ther Blue Jay, an' he'll be in on us soon. I'm monstrous sorry you posted him up. We could 'a' dropped 'em a heap better ef we could 'a' caught 'em like thunder snatched ther toad. They'll be lookin' fur us now, an' it'll jist be a square fight."

"But an honest one."

"Yes, but in a squar' game ther biggest hand gits ther stakes, an' he's got most all Git Thar a-backin' him. Them ther don't fight fur him won't fight ag'in' him. If he gits hold he'll never let go, an' yer can't git no more jestic in this camp than yer kin religion."

"Perhaps. That's what you're here for. If Starbiddle drops in a fair fight maybe some one else will run the town."

"Thar's suthin' in that. I hedn't looked that fur," said Ira, evidently surprised at the proposition.

"We'll think of that by-and-by. They can't reach us for a few days yet. Now, I want to see how the work stands. I brought a little offering for the men. We'll celebrate getting the old drift cleaned out. Pass it around, and then take me to the chamber I understand you have reached."

"They're workin' on ther other level. I kin send fur 'em; an' mebbe, ef you could make 'em a leetle speech when yer come back it would make ther thing go off better."

"Time enough for that. When they do their duty I'll praise them."

"An' when they don't you'll talk to 'em straight, with ther bark all on an' a six in each hand," laughed Ira, as he led the way.

"Take this along, for fear they will have forgotten you before your return."

The colonel drew a bottle of whisky from one of the baskets and Ira had no objections to looking after it. Finding that the cork was practicable he even took a surreptitious swallow or two, and found that it was of a brand that just suited his palate. They went down the drift together—in a little while a cloaked figure came back alone, grasping in either hand a revolver, passing by a dozen motionless forms that lay grouped around the empty baskets.

CHAPTER XXXI. GOING SOUTH.

"In all Git Thar there's not a soul that I can trust," said the colonel, tearing away his disguise, and seating himself on a boulder.

"Just now is the time one wants a pard to help reason up what is best to be done. Ha, ha, how the drugged whisky worked! They dropped around it like flies before the first frost. I've got the Spread Eagle, dead open and shut. Now, supposing the *cache* don't turn up after all could I hold on? I'm afraid not. The crisis is here and I've got to bolt. If I hadn't had Sunshine for a scapegoat they would have hustled me out before this."

"But I've got everything else in shape, and, whether the gold is a myth or not the colonel has got to disappear. A straight streak to Mexico, a little turning and doubling to throw the hounds off the trail, if they come too close, and then, ho for the East, and the game of all! Syringia must be rescued—ahem—and with her in my hands, and the niggers to tell their stories that game will be made, any way—Curse them, it's going to be more trouble to get them out of Git Thar without giving myself away, than their story is worth. Perhaps it would be better to let them slide. We shall see when I find out what Pius Pete knows about the Spread Eagle. I'll let his story go for what it is worth—and true or false, I'm afraid—I'm sorely afraid—that Petey's health is in a very precarious condition. Win or lose—the next hour will show which—I leave Git Thar. When the fox sees the hounds coming full cry he don't want to lie too long under the log. They'll nose him out, sure; they'll nose him out."

The colonel had recovered his breath and his senses. His course seemed clear to him, and he wanted to waste no time. In haste he sprang to his feet and hurried away to join his men, who, in some anxiety, were waiting for his coming.

"Steady, boys," he said, lifting his hand as they crowded around him.

"I'd like to have Peters and his little gang here, and so would I like to have Gray Hawk; but when the chance is open, we can't wait for anybody, and they can join us later on. I've been inside and had a good look all around. The men won't hurt—they're all sleeping like logs—and we can tie 'em up and look around. If they

have any oro ready to win, they must have hidden it somewhere, and we'll find it if we have to dig the whole thing over. Where's Pius Pete?"

"Hyar he be, all set. What's the next move in ther game?"

Starbiddle led him aside and they conversed a few moments in a low tone. Then the colonel's face wore a smile, and he exclaimed:

"Forward, all! Johnson, bring on the mules!"

Then there was a little throb of expectancy; a little gust of enthusiasm all around.

The colonel's men had been following his lead blindly. He paid well, some of them had been in the same boat long before, all were closely knit together, and as long as the wages held out there was not much hesitation about doing what he bid, even if it was to cut a throat or rob the mail. All they knew was that the colonel secretly had designs on the Spread Eagle. Why he did not advance openly they did not know or ask; and what he intended to do when his plans culminated no one more than guessed, though the supposition was that there would be a hard fight and a great deal of coin. It was a relief to know that the crisis was at hand, and that the armed neutrality was at last over.

There was no time lost. The Spread Eagle was conveniently near—so near that Black Moll had known what she was about when she spoke of Starbiddle's intention of swinging his claim around so that it overlapped. At a double-quick, and as regular as a platoon, they hurried across.

There was no sentinel on duty at the mouth of the mine, there was no sound of life in the depths beyond. The silence struck something like a chill to even such men as these. Was this group of stiffened bodies a pile of corpses?

"Don't be scared; they're liable to come to life again in a few hours unless they hit the bottles extra hard. Tie them up and take their sixes away, so that you won't have any nasty work to do when they come around again. While you're at that, Pete and I will take a squint at the true inwardness of all things. Come on, old man, head ahead if you know how this hole runs."

"You bet I do—if I ain't bin hyar fur years. I druv pick in them rocks afore you knew ther war such a place in Arizony."

He caught up a torch and led the way through the narrow passage that had been opened through the old, collapsed drift. Starbiddle, with his hand on a revolver, following at his heels.

The distance was not great; the way ended in a small, vaulted chamber, beyond which there was no evidence of any existing passage.

Pete looked around him with the air of one thoroughly at home.

"Ain't it jist ez I told yer, boss? A good many years hez passed sence I seen it; but she's all thar, jist as they left it. A trap she war, 'ith ther biggest kinder a bait in yander co'ner. Only, it war a bait thet he didn't want no man ter see. He kims afore my eyes now, a-takin' a las' look. Then I got back, an' he follered."

"You kin see what sorter work hed bin done hyar. It war all sot up like a figger four ez I uster make when I war a boy. A tetch on ther trigger, yer know, an' down she come."

"I war watchin' him when he come outen ther other end. He hed an ax in his hand, an' he looked in a mighty big hurry. I kinder thort he'd pulled ther string, an' I warn't wrong. He'd bin knockin' away ther stulls ez he kim along. He hedn't more ner got inter ther open when ther hull top dropped in with a roar, an' his *cache* lay hid behind three hundred yards ov solid rock. But she's hyar now."

He held the torch down as he spoke, and gave a start.

His eyes fell upon Ira Joyce.

Down he knelt.

"Howlin' heathen! It's Iry, sure ernough. He's jist a breathin', an' that's all. Are he in this game?"

"He seems to be. Tie him up and roll him aside, if you don't want to finish him up. You may judge whether I would have cared if you had put his light out at the Pay Dirt the other night."

"I'll fix him; but he don't look ez though he'd last long. Thar you be! I ain't no time ter spend now; mebbe I'll hev a leetle Dutch-Spanish ter whisper in yer ear after a bit—durn ye!"

He rolled the senseless body aside.

"Hold ther light a bit, kunnul, while I show yer how ter git ter bed-rock."

Pete was again cool—cool as an iceberg—but the colonel alternately shivered and then grew hot. He was staking so much on this, and if successful the reward would be so great. No wonder he trembled as Pete snatched up a pick and gave a great stroke.

"How's that?" he asked, as the pick made its way into an unsuspected crevice in the floor of rock.

With an effort he raised the slab as though it was a trap-door.

Another and another followed, until he had quite an opening that revealed the bare ground beneath.

"A leetle pick, a good bit of shovel, an' you'll find what Kunnul Carden buried."

He worked right on as he talked, Starbiddle answering nothing.

"An' thar yer be. You kin do ther rest yer-self, an' see ef Petey war throwin' off on yer."

The coldest of men will have the gold-fever on them sometimes, and just then Starbiddle had it hot. He gave the torch to Pete, and leaped into the opening. A few more wrenches and efforts; then he stooped and uttered a great shout.

"Gold it is! The fool found a pocket such as was never found before, and hid it away all these years for me—for us—to claim at last. See! it is in great chunks—almost solid. Five-sixths pure gold, just as it was chiseled out of the rock. I couldn't believe it. Did mortal man ever hear such a story before?"

"An' you've bin thinkin' Pius Pete a liar frum 'way back?"

"Don't say another word about it. I'll make that all right with you before we get through. You didn't expect me to believe you, anyhow, more than enough to back your hand? What use! It's all right now. Shake."

The two clasped hands.

"Don't go back on me an' I'll stay by you. Ef thar's a break, it'll be mighty hard fur somebody. What's ther next move?"

"The next move is to get out. You can take your share and stay here, if you dare; or you can go along. Another day don't find me in Git Thar."

"Nur me nuther. Thar'll be merry blazes when the camp wakes up. Bring in ther boys an' load up ther mules. Thar's a heap ov ore thar, but it won't take long ter clean it up. Yer goin' ter take ther hull gang along?"

"I think Peters has the men I can least trust with him. He can pay them off and follow if he wants to. The rest will be welcome. Their wages go on for a week, and they have the promise of a share in the strike."

"An' ef they try ter go back on yer?"

"Death! You and I can manage that, Petey. The moment they show crooked I'll draw, and we'll both of us sail in."

"What corpses thar'll be, oh what corpses!"

Peter laughed, and the colonel went to summon his men. He was in earnest in his intention to be away by morning, and began to think he had already wasted too much time.

By midnight a squad of mounted men, and a little knot of pack-mules hastened away from the Spread Eagle, taking the trail that led to the south.

CHAPTER XXXII.

NOT SO SAFE AS IT SEEMED.

SHORTLY after Colonel Starbiddle had taken his departure a man came staggering out of the drift of the Spread Eagle.

He seemed to be thoroughly bewildered, and stared around without taking in what he saw.

"Ther villain—ther infernal she-tiger! Every one on 'em dead but me, an' I'm hyar by a merikel. Ef I hedn't 'in too perlite ter drink hearty afore a woman I'd 'a' 'in ther other side ov ther range. But who'd 'a' thunk it, who'd 'a' thunk it? I'll git even ef it takes a year. Which way did she go, an' what fur bloody blazes did she do it fur?"

He was all at sea, and had no idea which way to turn. The motionless bodies he passed had seemed to him so many corpses. When he had felt one or two of them, and found no signs of life, he had left them and wandered on, possessed only with a dull desire for vengeance.

In the open air his brain cleared a little.

"It's strange. Seems ter me ther rest war tied up whar they lay; why warn't I? An' did I, er didn't I, feel some 'un a-pawin' over me; an' did I er didn't I hear some vices that hedn't orter bin in the Spread Eagle? Mebbe—yes—mebbe there's bin some sorter a crooked game ez I haven't caught onter yit."

He buried his face in his hands, rubbed his eyes, ran his fingers through his hair.

"Thar must be suthin' rotten somewhar. I'll go up ter headquarters, an' see what I kin find. It don't look ez though she'd throw off on us, when things begun ter run her way. Mebbe it war that outside pard ov hern, ez she war takin' in. That's it"—as the whole thing seemed to be suddenly clear. "The fiend has scooped in the hull boodle an' her with it. I'll go ter ther house an' see. Ef it aie I'll git even. I'll git even."

He repeated the threat over and over, though he had not the ghost of an idea how it was to be accomplished. Staggering, stumbling, at first hardly dragging himself along, then breaking into a shambling run as his brain grew steadier and his strength returned, he headed for Black Moll's cabin.

By the time he reached the building he was better able to think; and the open door attracted his attention.

"Suthin' rotten," he remarked. "She wouldn't leave things like that ef she had gone clean crazy. Thar's bin somebody hyar sence she left. I'll squint 'round an' see which way their toes turn."

He hurried in without knocking, and looked through the whole house. There was some confusion but nothing to indicate that it had been pillaged.

"Thar's no sign hyar; an' yit it's whar ther trail starts frum, I'll bet a million. Ef I could only ketch on!"

He stood outside, looking to the the right and left, uncertain which way to turn, but half-inclined to go to Git Thar and raise an alarm. He would have done so had he not been possessed with the desire to know first whether Jane Hetherington was sinned against or sinning.

While he hesitated, a man clapped him on the shoulder.

"Pard, ther cyclone hev bu'st an' thar's bin a awful cirkiss. What you goin' ter do 'bout it?"

"I'm goin' ter find pertick'lers, an' then go in fur justice. What do you know?"

"Jest this. Starbiddle hes took ther trick. He an' his men hev ther butt end ov what ther mine was wu'th, an' they lit out south, takin' Moll erlong. Thar ain't no time ter spend spreadin' ther news, fur ef yer don't do su'thin' soon Jane Heth'rin'ton 'll be a cold corpus, an' ther kunnel 'll skip with ther coin. He hev Petey along with him, toc, an' I wouldn't give a pickyune fur his thropple when they git him whar it's safe ter sice it. I'm goin' ter chip. Be you with me? They kinder throwed me off a bit, an' I ain't no time ter bring up my pards, so I'll gc it alone sooner ner miss. But you look like a good man ter tie to, an' I'm willin' ter try yer a spell. Ef Travelin' Eli don't make 'em sick yet you kin call him a liar from 'way back.—B-r-r-a-gh! I'm a tin tiger on ten wheels, an' I'll make my teeth meet!" Eli's shout arose once more.

"Count me with you. I must get tools an' then I'm ready."

"Hyar's tools ali yer want," answered Eli, thrusting a pair of revolvers into his hands. "But you'll hev ter go it a foot back. Starbiddle hev taken good keer ter pre-empt on all ther hossflesh in camp. He's hed it lyin' 'round, ready fur use—an' he's usin' it. Laigs do yer duty. Ef ye don't, we'll be left—bad."

"But who are you?" asked Joyce, in a momentary spasm of caution. "Kin I trust you?"

"Up to ther hub. Keep it to yerself, but I'm a tective on ther trail; an' I want Starbiddle bad. I've bin foolin' on ther wrong scent, but now I see my way sure. Come along, ef it's only ter see ther fun."

"I'll do more ner look on," gritted Ira. "Ef it's ary good to foller on foot, I'll be thar an' shoutin' when ther fun begins."

"Don't I know! They'll take a res' afore mornin', ter finish up ther odds an' ends; an' that's ther time Eli'll gi' thar. I meant ter hev a hull gang ter meet 'em; but if it don't turn up I'll be thar alone in ther daybreak. Amen, breth'ring! Hoop it up! It's a long time tell mornin'."

He led the way, Ira following at his shoulder. There were at least two on the trail; but they had the heavy end of a large contract to carry.

Colonel Starbiddle scarcely expected them, and had he done so, he would not have been seriously alarmed. He had enough men with him to suit his needs in any emergency that was likely to arise, so long as Git Thar was fooling away its time on the northern trail, and his work at the Spread Eagle remained undiscovered.

Of the latter he had little fear, for the present, unless he had failed to reach some of the gang.

And even in that case he thought he had covered up his tracks too well for them to find them until pursuit would be hopeless. Once away over the border, and a little army could scarcely reach him. He had been there before, and knew the country. Some of the men he would take with him. He would have to pay them well; but he could trust them all. There was not one that did not deserve hanging.

Had it not been for the prisoners he held in keeping in the hills, he would not have drawn rein for many more miles; but he did not doubt that he had plenty of time to hunt them up, even if Gray Hawk was not on the lookout for him, to lead straight to them.

In fact, he had not gone many miles before a single horseman, coming toward the party, stopped suddenly, as though just discovering its approach and uncertain whether to fight or fly.

"Hold, there! We are friends!" shouted the colonel. "Perhaps you can give us some information."

"You bet I kin, kunnel," said Jimsey, riding forward.

"I didn't know but what it mou't be Git Thar, up to a new wrinkle an' open fur mischief. Ef they dropped to ther facts, I dunno ez Peters could be spy'nu'f ter save me, fur thar's men thar thet git ther work in mighty suddint."

"All safe from that quarter, Jimsey. I've made a straight clean-up, closed the bank, and jumped the place for good. No more use for Git Thar, and I hope it will have no further use for me. What's the news from below? I was hoping some one would meet us. I was not sure I could strike the spot the first throw, and there's not much time to lose."

"That's jest it, kunnel. All on a string. Heaps ov tears an' hanky-pockerchuffs, but everythin' serene an' waitin'. Gray Hawk thort I'd better kin in an' see ef thar war any orders.

He didn't figger on jest so big er contract; but when he got onter ther breadth ov it, he didn't squeal, only he felt ez though he orter go slow. Ef he stumbled, you'd be blamed apt ter go in outen ther wet. He'll be happy ez a clam ter see ther boys all tergether ag'in. We kin all be on ther run afore mornin'. But say, you ain't goin' ter wait fur Peters, be yer?"

"Not very much. Peters is provided for. He is paid up to date, and I left a thousand for him and the boys. When he comes into town he will know where to look for it. Had any trouble with the weeping damsels? I suppose they have not been near each other. It's important that the blind girl does not drop onto the true facts. It would be awkward hereafter."

"Oh, this thing are run prezactly accordin' ter Hoyle. Ef yer drops ther one inter Dutchman's Pipe, ther other won't even know thar war a hole in ther ground. You'll find 'em all both jest ez you want 'em, ready ter kill er cure."

"That is the way," said the colonel, tersely. Pius Pete had moved ahead from the place he had been occupying in the center of the little company, and it was evident that Starbiddle didn't desire him to hear any more of this conversation than was necessary.

"Jimsey got ary fresh wrinkles?" Pete asked, as he edged nearer.

"Nothing to say, except that the coast is clear and the campaign going on all right. We'll map off the programme when we get into camp."

"An' when'll that be? It ain't overly safe ter think 'bout campin' afore daybreak."

"Unless some one sees us on the way, and follows close and careful, there's no danger of any one finding us there. If they do—while we carry the pill-boxes it will be very sick men that crawl in."

"Thet's so; but with that oro in charge, it's a blame sight better ter run than ter fight, an' don't yer furgit it! I've bin a wu'thless shote so long thet mebbe it spiles my nerve ter have a eent'rest in sich a heap ov coin. I'm clean fur gittin' whar ther ain't no resk afore we fiddle much time erway."

"Quite natural, Petey, quite natural; but I'm running the same risks you are, and you needn't be afraid that I won't take the best of care of myself. Don't let the boys get onto your notions. They take kinks sometimes, and I want everything lovely in this outfit."

"I war jest a-sayin'," responded Pete, mildly. You know how it is yerself. But I'll keep mum tell we hev a chance ter talk it over all by ourselves. I've bin a-thinkin'."

"Think as much as you choose; but I wouldn't advise you to talk very loud. The road is dark, and you can't tell who is listening along the edges."

Whether it was done purposely or not, the colonel's voice took on a solemn tone, quite different from the jovial sound that Git Thar had been accustomed to hear. It seemed to strike Pete. He said no more, but fell back into his place, and plodded along, the most silent of all. He scarcely appeared to notice when they turned aside and entered the foot-hills. But, accepting the colonel's permission, he was doing a heap of thinking.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE DUTCHMAN'S PIPE.

"Not much change," said the colonel, looking around him, and then turning to Gray Hawk.

"Not er bit," was the answer.

"Ef you an' me war like ther rocks we wouldn't change much in ten years, neither. It's kinder trange that we should be livin' yit. We ain't never skulked when ther pistol bullets war a-flyin'. Thar ain't so many ov ther old gang left."

"And there would be fewer yet if things kept on the way they have been running lately for much longer. S mebody has been getting in his work right up to nature. If you notice, every man that died in Git Thar with his boots on belonged to the old gang. Was it a ghost that did it, or has some one come to life? He didn't make any mistake."

"Ghost er not he got thar all ther same, an' ef I'd hed more time ter racket 'round town I'd hev nosed it out. I've hed it figgered down purty close fur some days, an' bin waitin' fur a chance ter tell you so. He's bin usin' clean powder, that don't make no smoke, er next ter none, an' shootin' frum his pockets. He must be all nerve ter be willin' ter take ther chance."

"Perhaps you are right, but it makes no difference now. If we had stayed he might have found us. You say that the woman you took for Black Moll is in the room that has the opening to the Dutchman's Pipe?"

"That's whar we put her. I thort ef you didn't want her that mou't be ther best place ter leave her. I hev known a party to drop down ther schute thar, an' never bother nobody no more."

The colonel shrugged his shoulders.

The Dutchman's Pipe was a bowl in the rocks. A dozen feet across at the top, a dozen feet deep, narrowing down like a funnel, at the bottom there was an opening that led downward straight as a plumb line. What might be below

no one could say, since, as yet, the depth of the crevice was unknown.

By the aid of ropes it had been explored for a hundred feet or more. At that distance the sides were as precipitous as ever, though widening out into a more irregular shape.

And into this at least one man had been flung, to never reappear. These men had no conscience; they were unacquainted with remorse; yet they looked at each other a little queerly as they spoke.

"You're with me yet?" said the colonel, at length.

"Thar an' back ag'in."

"I never went back on you, did I? And when I struck a good thing, you got your arm to the elbow into the pile."

"Allers."

"Then, throw her in. The game is made without her. I thought I might want her to talk first, but I've heard all I want without her. All she can say now can only hurt."

"In she goes."

"The sooner the better, so it's soon. If you need any one take Jimsey. He has been there before. You can trust him. Some of the rest perhaps you can't."

"Jimsey goes."

Without further orders Gray Hawk turned away, while the colonel went back to the fire, around which were stretched the men who had come with him from the plunder of the Spread Eagle, all save one or two who had been placed on guard at the entrance of the canyon below, and one over the pack-loads.

They were all sleeping but the one, and he did not seem more than half awake, as he sat crouched by the fire, smoking and blinking.

Starbiddle ran his eyes over the figures.

The one he was in search of was not there.

"Where is Pete?" he asked sharply of the drummer.

"Down b'low, standin' guard."

"A nice man he is to put on guard. If some one gave him a bottle of whisky yet that would finish it up. I'll have to see to it myself, I suppose."

He loosened the revolver at his belt and moved downward along the narrow, precipitous path.

When he came to the spot where he expected to find him he was not there.

He went further, until at last he found the sentinel at the very outer edge of the canyon.

It was not the man of whom he was in search.

"How's this? Where is that infernal fool, Pius Pete?"

"Up above, boss. I left him there when I came down here, anyhow."

"You're sure of that, are you?" Hasn't slipped by you and gone prospecting for a barrel of whisky? He's swallowed a quart since sundown and I was afraid to start him on another for fear he couldn't move by morning."

"Hasn't gone past here, boss. You'll find him laying back somewhere in the shadows. He won't come this way."

"Shoot him if he does," said the colonel, sternly; and he began to retrace his steps, muttering as he went:

"Just as well this way. It gives a fair excuse, and keeps up discipline. The boys would sooner have half than one-third, and I'll be that much ahead."

He did not find Pete lying in the shadows—nor did he expect to—though he kept a wary look out while he returned to the camp-fire.

He did not stop there, but went straight on, following the direction taken by Gray Hawk when, a little before, he had disappeared.

Gray Hawk had gone about his work in a business-like manner.

First he took a drink of whisky. Then he looked out for Jimsey, and found him in the niche that led to the Dutchman's Pipe.

"What yer dein', soddin' 'round hyar?" he asked.

"Gittin' tired."

"Reckon, then, we'd better finish ther job an' bunk in."

"That's ther boss's say-so?"

"Just prezactly."

"Then we'll git thar."

He rose as he spoke, and the two went along the niche until it opened out into a small, cave-like apartment.

Just where they entered a small fire was smoldering, the smoke drawing upward in a way that suggested a chimney-like draft above.

"Hev ter hev a leetle more light on ther subject. It's like ter be a extry dark 'un," said Gray Hawk, stirring the fire and throwing on it an armful of dry cones.

As the blaze flamed up it revealed, not far away, the form of a woman huddled up on a rude couch. Her hands were bound together behind her back with a leather strap, and her ankles were confined the same way. She could scarcely have been more uncomfortable and have slept.

She opened her eyes and saw the two men bending over her.

"Sorry ter disturb yer. mum, but it's ther

orders ov ther boss. I wouldn't say a word if I war you, an' things'll go a heap more comfortable."

"He's kerrect, mum," added Jimsey, "but fur fear yer might be tempted ter make a remark afore ther time comes mebbe it'd be better ter put a bridle in yer mouth. It's hard fur a female critter ter hold her hush."

"What new villainy is on foot now? Who is this 'boss' you speak of? Why does he not come and see me face to face?"

"He kinder thinks thet mebbe it would be better fur you ter see him; an' ef you'll jest step this way p'rhaps it kin be all 'ranged. Ef not, why not?"

He spoke with a grin, and the flickering fire brought out the deeply sinister expression on his face, but Alda did not see it. She was looking beyond and over his shoulder.

The flame lit up the huge rock, until the Dutchman's pipe seemed to be an altar.

And sitting on the edge of it, with his legs dangling down the side and a revolver in either hand, was On Deck Harry.

If the girl had not been as cool as an icicle she might not have recognized him; or recognizing him would have uttered a cry of astonishment or delight.

She did neither. Harper held up one hand, and though it still grasped the pistol it seemed to make a gesture of warning and of silence.

The motion reassured her. He felt no anger at the part she had so mistakenly played with him, or if he did it would not interfere with his giving her what aid he could. Why did he not shoot the villains down?

The distance was not great, the two men made made a fair mark; but he could hardly be blamed for not taking the chances. If a bullet went wrong it might strike her. And if he dropped both, his escape might be no nearer, with an unknown number of outlaws ready to pour in. He must have some other scheme in view.

Thinking of this she uttered no sound, and allowed herself to be caught up and carried unresistingly forward, toward the rock.

As they came nearer Harper swung his feet swiftly up. She had a glimpse of him peering downward, his revolvers still thrust to the front. Then he disappeared, just before Gray Hawk and his partner looked upward, measuring the distance with their eyes.

"Ther boss wants ter see her bad!" said Jimsey.

"Orful bad," answered Jimsey.

An' that's ther highest way, but it's a hefty job ter kerry a gal ov her size up ther ladder."

"You kin hev it, pard; I don't want it."

"Loosen me and I will walk," said Alda, while a sudden, terrible doubt came into her mind.

"Oh, no! 'Tain't necessary. We kin jest toss her up an' save trouble, can't we, Jimsey?"

"In course. Hyar we be. One fur nothin'! two fur show! three ter make ready!"

They swung her carelessly between them, gathering momentum.

"Four to go!" shouted Jimsey, excited in spite of himself.

The gripe on either side simultaneously loosened.

Rising high in air, Alda shot forward over the very center of the Dutchman's Pipe, and then dropped downward.

A single scream, muffled, seemed to come from the very center of the rock, and then all was still.

"Slick as a whistle," said Jimsey. "No use ter climb up ter see ef she went through all right."

They listened a moment, but heard no sound.

"Dutchman," laughed Gray Hawk, shaking his fist at the altar-like rock, "you got that in yer pipe, now smoke it."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

ELI GETS THERE.

WHEN the two men turned away, Colonel Starbiddle was standing in the passage. He had come upon them just as their work was finished, and only in time to hear Alda's departing scream.

He was covered promptly by Gray Hawk's revolver, which, however, dropped instantly as he was recognized.

"Does that fill ther bill?" asked the villainous lieutenant.

In spite of himself the colonel shuddered.

"Clear down to the last line. I don't know but what I would be comfortable if I was not so certain of it. I hope that screech won't haunt me. Why didn't you have her gagged? It's a wonder if none of the boys come to see what is the matter."

"Let 'em come. They won't see much anyhow, unless they want ter take ther reesk an' foller on ther same road. I guess they won't be anxious."

"Unless it is that blundering idiot, Pius Pete. He seems to want the whole earth, and I don't know but what he will have to go on the same journey. Have you seen anything of him?"

"Nary thing. Ef he's bin layin' round hyar he's seen something ter steady his nerves."

"He has been hiding somewhere for some

purpose. If he had taken anything along I might think he had pulled up stakes and left for good. Hunt him up; look around for him. If you find him say that I want to see him here."

"You sure you want to see him hyar? In course you didn't hev no hand in ther leetle bit of a frolic hyar; but still, don't yer know, it mou't be more comfortable all 'round ef you could hold yer talkee-talk somewhar's else."

"There's something in that. He's not altogether as big a fool as he looks, and might kick hard before we got him into the traces. I want no great racket if we can help it. Just a quiet retirement and nothing further to say. I want him settled before I interview Syringia. I have not altogether decided what course to take with her. If I turn up now, I'll have to have you men that she has heard keep mighty quiet for a few days. You understand, there must be a bold rescue, a running fight, and a final escape. The girl is worth a fortune, but she must be handled just right."

"We sabbe. I've hed an eye on thet all erlong. Ef she kin re-cognize anybody but Sid Beams by his vice, I'm 'way off; an' I ain't so sure 'bout him. I wouldn't 'a' knowed him myself. We bin keeful, fur we ain't ready ter drop outen company yit. Git thar may foller a good ways."

"Very well. I have the matter about arranged in my mind. You will start in a few moments, with the girl—as soon as I have matters adjusted with Pete. Two or three of you will be enough to make all the racket that is needed when the rest of us overtake you. After that we keep on south. Before long she will understand the story as I do. If not there will be plenty of disinterested people that will hear and understand it before she fades away."

"All right. Let Sid an' Dandy take charge. They know ther lay ov ther land, an' they ain't ther kind ter make no mistakes when ther blood gits warm an' ther shootin' an' ther shoutin' begins. In sich a mix-up it mou't be better ter hev cooler heads to ther front than mine an' Jimsey's."

"You mean—" the colonel began sternly.

"Oh, nothin'! ther might be mistakes on both sides. They will happen in ther best regulated families. Even Jimsey an' I mou't go outen the wet—an' we can't hardly be spared."

"Enough. Have it your own way. You mistrust me. That is your mistake. Beware that you give me no occasion to return the compliment. No more of this. It's a time when talk is not as cheap as it looks. We must be on the way. The boys are rested, and we don't know how soon hours will count for money."

Up to this Starbiddle had hardly settled his plans in regard to Syringia; now he saw them all clearly. Of all his men he was certain, except Pius Pete. He hardly suspected him, but he was very anxious to drop him, all the same.

But what had become of the man of piety?

That was a question that needed a solution. Starbiddle had expected to find him with the other men either on guard, at the fire, or in the niche. Unless he had been overlooked, or had made good his retreat, which he would hardly be likely to do, there was only one other place to look for him, and that was where, last of all, he desired to find him.

He did not care to appear there in search of him; yet, so long as he kept his voice to himself, there was little danger of the blind girl recognizing him. When he came out of the niche he turned to the right from the terrace on which the party had halted, and started to follow a narrow path, that led around a projecting spur, though now hidden by the shadows, save where a few feet of the further end lay in the moonlight.

It was a rude but practicable footway for one with sure feet and a cool head, though a stumble there meant death. A misstep and a fall over the rocks would end the one that took them.

Scarcely had he started on the journey when a man appeared against the sky, coming around the point where the path seemed to end. He drew back and watched him. Was it Pete, or was it the sentinel, coming back for relief or to make a report? It was only a glimpse that he had. Then the man, hugging the wall of rock, vanished. If he was still advancing he came like a ghost, for the falling of his feet made no sound.

Hastily Starbiddle drew backward, until he had once more reached the platform.

"I could drop him as he came," the colonel muttered, "but I need Sid Beams. And it wouldn't do to let Pete get too close. If he didn't go overboard with the shock he might make a blind rush, and both of us drop out in the flurry. I'll wait till it's a little safer. And there he could not help but see me. I can reach him with a knife—if Gray Hawk comes—"

Light steps behind him told that Gray Hawk was there and Jimsey was coming. He took a couple more steps backward and hastily whispered his orders. Then the three silently waited.

It was only for a moment.

The figure of a man again appeared, limned against the sky.

"Halt there, and hands up! Who are you and what are you doing here?"

"Up they be, pard. It's nobody but me, Pius Pete. What yer got in yer now?"

The challenge was given in a low, set tone; the answer in the usual careless one of the speaker, and the three watchers could see his hands go up like the arms of a semaphore.

"I've got this in me. I want to know what you mean, nosing around in affairs that don't concern you. Where have you been and what have you done?"

"Bin lookin' 'round ter see that thar wa'n't no chance ter take us flank an' rear. This ain't no nice sorter a trap you've got us inter, an' ef I hed my say we'd be gittin' outen this afore mornin'."

"Don't be excited, Petey, you can be moving right away. No one wants to keep you here. What did you find in your prowling?"

"Nothin' but one ov the boys settin' thar with a gun in his fist. He sed I'd better go back; an' I went. Dog-gone him, I don't want him ter talk that way ter me! When he gits off duty I'll settle with him. It's my coin that's helpin' ter pay fur this outfit, an' I don't want him ter put on any frills over me."

"Peter, do you think I'm an infernal fool? I see how it is. You're not satisfied with your share of the plunder. You want the earth. I think it's time for you to retire."

The colonel was in the shadow as to Pete, and his right hand held his knife. He threw up his left hand in signal.

For answer came the sound of two hammers going back, as Gray Hawk and Jimsey cocked their revolvers.

Only, he had slightly mistaken his man. He might blunder on occasion, and shoot wide of the mark in a frolic at the Pay Dirt, but here he was very steady, and sure enough to beat the record.

As their hammers clicked his hands went down, and each held a derringer that he had shaken out of his sleeve. When they came in line he pulled triggers without dwelling an instant on his aim.

The flashes came so near together that they seemed to be but a single, extended one, and with the report the two men went down side by side, their undischarged pistols dropping from their nerveless fingers, as though they had been withered by lightning.

Starbiddle had courage of his own—no man ever doubted it. He rather preferred to have tools to do his wickedest work, but he never flinched at a pinch. At the reports he sprung forward. Had he held a revolver he would have taken a snap shot; as it was his knife he made a sweeping cut at the man who, his derringers discharged, had not had time to draw other weapons.

With a quick bend and twist of his body Pius Pete partially evaded the blow.

At least it made no wound; but the keen blade, driven behind his belt, severed it. His revolvers dropped to the ground, then rolled over the edge of the rock and shot downward. He was weaponless, alone, the colonel's hand rising for another stroke, and a cry from the camp told that the men, aroused by the double report, were coming with a race.

He did not hesitate, but springing backward, turned and fled with reckless haste along the narrow, dangerous pathway.

"Yonder man—riddle him—yonder he goes! Quick! Curse him, he will reach it yet!"

By guess the colonel aimed and worked thumb and finger as fast as he knew how, hoping to reach Pete by chance if not by aim.

The flare of his pistols blinded him, but by its light the men who came rushing up saw Gray Hawk and Jimsey, each with a ball through the brain, and a flying figure darting along the dangerous pathway.

More revolvers cracked, and in the midst of a storm of bullets Pete turned the point and vanished.

There might have been a mad rush had it not been that in the stillness that followed the disappearance there was a single report from just behind them.

What was the meaning of that? Another surprise?

Leaving Johnson to watch the pathway, Starbiddle swirled his men around and back. Pius Pete was in a trap, even if it had been unintentionally baited with Syringia; and on the other hand was the gold.

It was only a few yards until they could see the smoldering camp-fire that had been scarcely softening the rigor of the morning air, and the precious packs piled beside it.

They could see—and then they halted.

Another man lay motionless; and, beyond him, seated on one of the packs, with a revolver in each hand that lay very straight for them, was Travelin' Eli!

"Back thar, gentlemen! Keno fur Travelin' Eli! You won't call ther turn this evenin'. Some other evenin', p'raps; but fur ther present Eli hes got thar."

CHAPTER XXXV.

ALL CASH IN AND THE BANK CLOSES.

DOWN with him!" yelled Starbiddle, his coolness shaken more than ever by this last blow.

"It's only one man, and he a traveling gas-

house! Over him with a rush! He dar'n't if he wanted to, and he couldn't hit the bigness of a man if he tried!"

While he spoke Starbiddle made a movement to recharge his revolver, which he had emptied in the late fusillade.

"Hold on a moment, my daisies!" retorted Eli, with startling distinctness.

"You listen to me warble. The first man that raises a hand, er tries to recharge a weepin' 'll go over ther range a-'hoopin'. I've jest got ther dea-l medercin' on this gang, an' ez soon ez my pards git through sortin' over ther nippers we'll put 'em on. I wouldn't try it, kunnel. It's rough lines, but we got yer foul."

He seemed to watch every man there at the same time, and though the dead-lock could not last forever, even the colonel didn't seem inclined to make the first move to break it.

"Ther fact are, Petey hes just saved ther only two men outside ov ther kunnel thet we hev anything big in fur, an' I'd hate ter hev ter cut loose. Ef I hed my way I'd say I'd sooner hev yer room than yer company; but Johnny Price sez he'd at least like ter hev his pick ov ther critters when he makes his round-up."

"John Price?"

Some one spoke the name.

"Yes, John Price, 'tective, better known ter you galoots at Git Thar ez Billy Barker, gay gambolier. He's right outside, waitin' till I git done talkin'. Then he'll hev his say-so. Petey an' him are pards—an' Petey ain't half ez big a fool ez he looks. Drop it, Star, drop it! Move that finger another inch, an' I'll strike yer dizzy."

His quick eye had detected the almost imperceptible movement, and he challenged it at once.

"Who are you, then?" asked the colonel, perceptibly shrinking, as though he saw the bullet actually coming.

"Gene Hungerford, curse you and your cousin!" shouted Eli. "I'm going to see that the boot goes on the other leg now, or know the reason why."

"It is false. Gene Hungerford is dead—died years ago."

"Walter Gruel, then, if that suits you any better. I might give you two or three other names, thanks to the devilish snarl you got me tangled in; but those are good enough. And if you don't like them, Traveling Eli is around to fall back on. And Carden will be here in a minute. He's a friend of yours; and so is Pius Pete. Bang can't come—you sent him through the Dutchman's Pipe years ago—but you'll find his daughter very much around. I've been wanting to see some such family pic-nic for years, and now that it is here I can just feel the glory sloshing around close down to my boots. Won't there be a hallelujah love-feast when we get back to Git Thar and divide up the spoils? Anybody going to chip? If not, I'll rake in the pot on the blind and make a fresh deal."

With careless grace he kept them covered, yet his keen eyes were taking in every move. It was not likely that one man could hold them longer. The colonel must have some trump card back, or he would not still be taking things quite so coldly.

There was one card that Starbiddle wanted to account for before he played his hand for all it was worth. It might not be out; it might already have been taken in the deal made before he was called on to play. Still he gave a little time for its appearance, and it came along, as sure as fate. A man stole up the pathway at Eli's back, and, not ten feet away, took deliberate aim.

The colonel saw him, watched him, was waiting for him. The outer sentinel had doubtless heard the rattle of fire-arms and was coming to see what was the matter.

There was a moment of breathless suspense. Then—

The muzzle of a revolver pressed hard against the head of Colonel Starbiddle!

"Don't you move. That's Ira Joyce there behind Eli, and he's playing roots on you. See? We have you; and the first man of the gang that drops his hands, goes down."

"An' you thought you could shake Petey, did yer, after you'd kerreled ther coin? Not much! He's a chump frum 'way back, but he gits thar every time."

Billy Barker, On Deck Harry and Pius Pete had glided from the niche that led to the Dutchman's Pipe, their weapons ready. As Pete spoke he snapped a pair of handcuffs over the colonel's wrists.

"And now, you men, we'd just as soon fight as talk, as far we are concerned; but there's nothing against you, so far, that is really a killing matter. You have backed Starbiddle's game, and the colonel has gone burst. If you choose to draw out, all right. If that don't suit you, say the word and we'll skin you alive. I'm John Price, detective, with the law on my side, and every man of you that goes under now is paid for. Which is it? Life or death?"

"Ef that's ther pure quill I guess we'll hev ter throw up. You're about man ter man, an' hold ther drop besides. Ef we kin jump ther game now we'd be blamed fools ef we didn't go."

"We'll look after you that you don't have a

chance to do any harm on second thoughts, but you show you mean it and we'll turn you loose. Down with your arms now, and march into the rift where we just came out."

Without a murmur the sharp order was obeyed. With six brace of revolvers pointed where they were bound to do good there was not much else to do.

Only the colonel stood white and shivering.

Was it a ghost that he saw; or was it really Alda alive, and holding the drop along with the rest of them?

"You thought she went down the Dutchman's Pipe, did you? My friend, there have been some changes since you were here last, and there was a wrinkle or two that even you did not know. The stem of the pipe runs up into the room where you put Sy, and the mouth-piece reaches to the other side of the hill. Harper was on deck when your gang came prowling around, and he would have laid them cold if he hadn't wanted to see what was the game. It wasn't his say-so that he was here; but when he caught on it was for all he was worth. He was inside of the bowl to save your victim; Syringia was taken care of by Carden and myself; and Eli arrived in time to put on the finishing touches. If he deceived us as well as you he got there all the same. The cache will go into the hands of its proper owners, and you will go into the hands of justice, where you belong. Guards, take him away! We'll hold a little family council and clear up the mysteries."

As Barker—or John Price—finished his address, two of the escort that Alda had furnished On Deck Harry stepped forward and led the wilted colonel away.

"Quite a family reunion," said the *soi-disant* Traveling Eli, looking around in some little doubt how to begin.

"There's a lot of us been trying to work on the same vein, but by different drifts. I guess if we had been a little more confiding we could have reached pay rock somewhat sooner. For some years I haven't been blessed with too much confidence in human nature, and I don't know that I'd risk very much on it now; but in this family party we needn't be afraid but what everything goes. Peter, old boy—Carden, old friend—after what you have heard are you willing to shake, or must our little girl knock the truth into you with a club? I believe it was Price that first got onto you, but I wasn't very far behind when I was once up to who was doing the pocket business, and had unearthed a couple of your victims. I knew the racket of old, and I found that you were always bringing the right man."

"Shake it is! I think I see it all clear now, but it took time to get around to it. I never was sure who he was till I saw him dressed up as Black Moll. After that I could believe in anything, and I swallowed the rest at the last moment. I don't think he ever suspected me. That's what threw him so cold when you gave it away. He roped me in, you understand. Found I used to work in the old Spread Eagle and had a secret. Got onto it by big promises and much whisky—a heap more than I wanted."

"I was watching Black Moll, too. Never guessed, or she might have had me for a solid pard. I set him to tunnel from the Blue Jay, and lay back for 'em to fight it out. I hadn't the means to clean out the old drift, and I didn't dare to give myself away then—I understand it's all right now. But I meant to have my share of the coin, whichever side got in ahead. I'll wait a little while, now, before I say any more."

Alda Bang and John Price were off by themselves in a corner, talking matters over. They seemed to be uncertain whether to quarrel, or kiss and be friends—or more.

"If you didn't know that Jane Hetherington was I, you don't deserve, sir, to be recognized!"

"But, how did I know which mine to watch? I had my eye on the Blue Jay and Starbiddle; wasn't that close enough? I began at the other end and traced things as I went along but I didn't find any signs of you anywhere. How should I know? It was only a short time ago that I saw your face under its new garb."

"We'll let that go. You did your work well, but I was afraid you would spoil all. If you and On Deck Harry carried on the war on Sunshine what was to become of me?"

"But the joke was that I wasn't after Sunshine at all," said Harper, who overheard the latter part.

"He heard Price was trailing him down, and took me in as the detective. But he understood there were some points worth knowing and that the detective might be more friend than foe. And as a detective would not be a bad sort of a man to have as a pard he rung in that sort of a disguise on me, went to all that risk and danger and hired me to help hunt himself, when I would have been glad to give him a point or two if he had told who he was. He fooled me, of course he did; but, we were both talking for greens when Petey and Colonel Star were listening out at the shanty?"

"What brought me here? Well, I came largely on the sport, but I sported this way to find the little blind girl I took an interest in when I did her a good turn nigh to a year ago. I had dropped on some points, and felt I might help her if I found her."

"I thought I had a sure thing when the stranger in the mountain began to open up—"

"That was me ag'in," chuckled Sunshine, in the voice of Eli. "I had heard of her but I didn't see her yet."

"I understand now—wanted to put her on her guard—then I thought you were the sure enough Carden. All right! I got here. I waggoned around the burg and didn't have a very comfortable time. My pard didn't trust me; and I hadn't a universe of confidence in him; but if we straggled in the procession we're bunched at the grave. I hope the little daisy's troubles are over. I've been trying to explain to her that she has found two fathers instead of one. She's patient as a lamb, but she's waiting to see them both. Now, they're all down but nine, set 'em up on the other alley! It would take a year to explain all the points; let the affections speak. You can arrange for your daughter between you, and then settle how to divide the Carden cache afterwards. I'll trust you all that Miss Alda gets her share, and the rest don't count. Here is little Sy."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

FINIS.

THE game for the cache was played to the end, and the parties that had been at cross-purposes so long, understood each other at last.

The story that Traveling Eli told to Pius Pete and Billy Barker, together with the conversation detailed in the last chapter, explains with almost sufficient clearness the mystery of the cache, though perhaps a few additional words may not be out of place. Some of them were told before the long conference broke up; others were added afterward from time to time; others not told at all, since they are the sequel to the story.

When the outlaws, under the man who was really John Hungerford years before, attacked the Spread Eagle, Carden, who was afraid for more than one reason, had sprung the trap already prepared, and buried the cache of the wonderful pocket beyond finding without a long and toilsome search.

When the gang went away, baffled, and Gene Hungerford had set the colonel free at the last gasp, he fled, taking Syringia with him.

After that there was a blank. How he lived, how he supported the child he believed to be his sister's, was more than he could ever explain. But long after, he came to his senses, and providing for the girl, as he believed, he quietly went away on the hunt of vengeance and his gold.

In course of time Syringia went in search of the man she had been led to believe was her father. As Duffey said, she picked Pet up, to serve as a guide for her wandering feet, though she learned to love him as a brother.

Shortly after that the two colored persons came to her, bringing a letter which said that they were old servants of her mother's family—as they were—and that she should go with them to Git Thar, where her father would join them, though they should keep his name and coming a secret.

But Colonel Carden was already there, in the guise of Pius Pete.

A perfect shot and a cool head, he made himself appear a besotted bungler, whose only redeeming trait was a rude, good nature. From time to time he recognized members of the outlaw band that had so cruelly harmed him; and at every one he quietly shot to kill.

He found a woman holding the Spread Eagle, tooth and nail, and Colonel John Starbiddle plotting to oust her. He became intimate with Starbiddle, claiming to have been one of the men who had worked for Carden, and found that the colonel was after the hidden treasure, while he had no idea that Jane Hetherington—or Black Moll, as she was more frequently called—was more than she seemed.

Starbiddle he half-recognized; but made no sign. He intended, if possible, to have him extricate his treasure for him, and trust to luck to reclaim it from his hands.

When he and John Price visited the cabin it was empty; and the next day Price followed the trail to the rendezvous in the mountains. Though he missed Gray Hawk, he fortunately stumbled upon On Deck Harry and certain members of Sunshine's band, who knew more about the labyrinthine retreat than did Gray Hawk, outlaw though he had been, and at one time a lurker in those hills.

For a day they watched over the two prisoners, that no harm should come to them, understanding that the arch plotter was to come, and afraid to make their appearance sooner.

Afterward Traveling Eli came, and Starbiddle with the rest. The treasure was there at their hands, and they captured it even easier than they had hoped for.

Who was Alda Bang?

She was the daughter of an old partner of Colonel Carden who had staked him for the

prospecting tour that ended in the Spread Eagle. He had heard of the wild work at the Spread Eagle, and set off at once to look after his side partner.

What he found was a grave. His disappearance had given rise to much trouble and suspicion; and long after Alda found an unopened letter from Canada to her father—written in the time of his mental distress—giving a history of the *cache*, in which, under mining rule, Bang had a half interest; of Hungerford's supposed connection with the outlaws and base treachery; and many other particulars, yet neglecting to give the location of the mine.

She was a bold, fearless girl, with many strange accomplishments, and the story stirred her deeply. She believed her father had fallen by the hand of the same outlaw and wished to go in person, and at once, to avenge his death and reclaim his gold.

John Price, her betrothed, tried to hold her back, offering to do the work himself when he could close his affairs for the task. They quarreled; in his absence she fled, well supplied with funds, but under a disguise that he did not penetrate. How well they each did their work the reader knows, and can easily guess they came together at last.

At first she suspected that Major Sunshine might be the outlaw who had done the wild work at the Spread Eagle, and probably killed her father. Afterward she obtained the proof that he was a new man—and fair evidence that it was the Gene Hungerford whose story she had been tracing down. She knew that Carden had been mistaken, and she brought him in to help out at the crisis.

Ira Joyce, an old-timer, had been her right-hand man. It was by chance that she met him, but he served her well. He and "Pius Pete" made their mutual confidences, and though each kept a great deal back, both were able to guess at the state of the game. The mock quarrel was never renewed in earnest, and Ira was richly rewarded.

Between them all the history of Syringia, from the time when, as a babe, she was stolen from her dead mother's breast, to the hour she was restored to her father, was all unravelled.

And Tom Duffey's prophecy came true enough. When she had been under the hands of a famous oculist for a year she could once more see as well as the best! Her eyes have not yet rested on Harry Harper—that natty little sport was last heard from down in Mexico—but in the future—who can tell? Of one thing be sure: If she needs him and he knows it, as doubtless he will, he will be all on deck.

Git Thar scarcely got to the true inwardness of the story. Its disgusted chiefs had just returned from a vain chase after Sunshine when the army and its one important captain moved in from the South, and on what they heard they had an ardent desire to hang Starbiddle, of whom, in consequence, they were not allowed to see very much. That is, the honest bad men did—Peters and his contingent from the Blue Jay kept their own counsel, and skipped.

In about the same boat went Duffey and his pard. Whatever schemes the bummer might have had came to sudden grief, and he and his pard went drifting out of camp, to their surprise richer by the full reward named by Harper if they brought back an answer from Sunshine. They had not seen him and consequently Tom had not told his story—perhaps they had not even mislaid Starbiddle—or John Hungerford—by showing him the letter they bore. Anyway On Deck Harry felt in a liberal mood, and could afford to gratify it.

Sub rosa, the road-agents received a large subsidy from Alda Bang; who did not otherwise account for the disappearance of their late chief—it had been years since John Hungerford severed his connection with the outlaws and tried his desperate fortunes elsewhere, to return to Git Thar as Colonel Starbiddle. Gene Hungerford simply vanished, and remained for a time at least, as though he was not. It was a regret with him that he had been mixed up with the outlaws, but there were only a couple to whom his secret was known and they had close mouths. He had intended to use the band, and did to a certain extent. If he got through straightening up the Spread Eagle affairs without introducing them too prominently, so much the better.

At all events, the mine was subsequently sold; the *cache* divided; the two darkies, who had been working in Starbiddle's interests, believing him to be his cousin, were pardoned; John Hungerford went to justice; the partners in the game made their exit, and as far as heard from the Git Thar episode in their lives is closed forever.

THE END.

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